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THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY MODERN COMIC PLAYS

Gender and sexuality has become an important aspect of literary criticism in recent years. These constructs have although not totally isolated from one another, work in clear asymmetry. This paper aims at taking a critical look at two works of Oscar Wilde's works; *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance* through the lenses of the issues of gender and sexuality.

Because of his penetrating search for meaning in the social world as well as in the interior landscape of the individual, Wilde's work, both dramatic and non-dramatic, have come to be viewed as standing apart from run-of-the-mill Victorian self-reflection. Yet Wilde is far less of a maverick than he is often claimed to be. Looking closely at his themes, his plot-design and his stage technique, we find that he depended heavily upon the standards of the theatre for which he wrote. The peculiar force of Wilde's drama arises not from his rejection of contemporary theatre, its techniques and its ethos but from his ability to exploit its resources to engender a contrary reading of the world, especially of women's place in it. It is not surprising that the growing critical awareness of the dynamic of this creative reversal should have encouraged a view of Wilde as a rebel against conventional morality. But it remains to be seen whether his alternative stance warrants placing him so diametrically opposite late nineteenth century views of women as to discover in him a proto-feminist. While confirming Wilde's rebel status, the present study probes further into the nuances of his concept of women. Taking note of the climate of ideas into which he was born and measuring his indebtedness to the theatre tradition of his time, this study examines Wilde's systematic undercutting of his contemporary ideology of the feminine. In the process, however, it discovers a paradox on a deeper level of idea formation in Wilde's representation of women: while Wilde mocks his society's confinement of women into prescribed roles, he

also fears the disruptive power of women's self-determination. Regressing through the gender identities and relations that Wilde dramatizes, we discover a constant tension between the assertion of women's autonomy and fear of women's ascendancy over men. We may therefore locate the dramatic and moral urgency of Wilde's plays in a deep-rooted conflict in his response to the idea of women which determines his choice as much of the themes as the forms of his plays, extending from the society comedy of manners to symbolic drama.

The Presentation of Gender and Sexuality in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance* As evidenced by plot outlines, legitimacy, eligibility for marriage and society's expectations for married life are all prominent issues in the plays. Gender roles and sexuality are also issues very much connected with marriage and family. Male aesthetes and The New Woman were prominent figures of the time who questioned the definitions of femininity and masculinity. The New Woman was a stereotype that was seen as simultaneously over – sexed and mannish, over – educated and asinine. Fertility and intellect were linked and her brain, her ability to reproduce would be compromised which meant she was a danger to the social order that required procreation to propagate itself. It was not just the right to education that the New Woman wanted, they challenged the ideology that determined separate spheres for men and women and demanded that women be allowed all the same opportunities as men. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Chiltern has been identified as a New Woman. She encourages women in her society to find “a serious purpose in life”, namely education. She takes part in the Women's Liberal Association where they discuss things like “Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, and the Parliamentary Franchise” and is “a great champion of the Higher Education of Woman.” But while she promotes feminist ideas, she is no embodiment of the New Woman ideal. She is relatively independent but it is only through her marriage she manages to be so. At the end of the play her views change and she expresses thoughts that are imposed on her by the male society. Mrs. Cheveley is another character in *An Ideal Husband* with the elements of the New Woman. She has a position at the Viennese Embassy and is very intelligent but she has no interest in marriage. She does not care about the London season because “it is too matrimonial”; rather she goes into town for business. She attempts to barter marriage with Lord Goring, an action that underlines the economic significance of marriage, especially for women.

Another stereotype is the Fallen Woman and particularly society's attitude towards and treatment of her are issues raised in *A Woman of No Importance*. Mrs. Arbuthnot had a child by Lord Illingworth but he refused to marry her and legitimise their son, forcing her to live a life of "suffering and... shame." When we encounter her in the play, her son is grown; she has changed her name, and voluntarily stays relatively "out of the world." By hiding out and concealing her past she has managed to gain a reputation of respectability and is considered "the sweetest of women." The play shows the error in the treatment of fallen women. It emphasized that the amount of punishment and suffering the women have had to go through is disproportionate to their infraction. Mrs. Arbuthnot's crime "spoiled [her] youth...ruined [her] life...tainted every moment of [her] days." For not adhering to the governing structures that maintain the rules of appropriate behaviour for women, they are shut out of society. They are labeled as deviant and cast out.

Much of the plays provide commentary on the role of women in society. Sir Robert asks Mrs. Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband* if she thinks science can grapple with the problem of women, which sets up the play's suggestion that women are highly complex. In the final act, Lord Goring gives a speech to Lady Chiltern about the role of women in society and in marriage, stressing the importance of supporting a husband in pursuing what he loves rather than stifling his desires. Lord Goring often draws a clear distinction between the role of men and women in society and in marriage. In Act III, he thinks to himself that all women should stand by their husbands. Lord Caversham suggests that only men, and not women, are endowed with common sense.

Although many of the male characters have problems with the women, many women have problems with the men. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are miserable with their husbands, and fed up with their perfection. Mrs. Markby and Mrs. Cheveley believe that men need education, but doubt their capacity to develop. Like Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, Sir Robert in *An Ideal Husband* was young and inexperienced at the time and like her, one past mistake could cost him his entire position. In drawing the parallel between the fallen women and Sir Robert, the plays challenge the late-Victorian thinking of genders as different in kind. Instead they are very similar and capable of making the same mistakes. It is not just the women who are subjected to the moral code that produces Fallen Women. Sir Robert Chiltern's crime in *An*

Ideal Husband does not pertain to sexuality instead he sold a cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim. However there are striking similarities. The way Sir Robert describes it, Baron Arnheim seduced him, and the difference is with him the incentive was power rather than love. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Markby and Lady Basildon, and Mrs. Marchmont also comment on the role of women. Lady Markby talks about women, deriding their higher education, a topic that Lady Chiltern rigorously defends. She explains that in the past, women were taught not to understand anything but that the modern woman is far knowledgeable. Thus, women have a complex role within the plays. The coexistence of men and women often seems a constant struggle, but one that is ultimately beneficial to all. Society's restrictions applied to men as well. Because it was a patriarchal society men did have more freedom compared to women but their role was no more natural than that of women. There is the cowardly or "dandy" man. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring "rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season."

That is to say, he, too, works very hard at maintaining his lifestyle of idleness. The only manly character in *An Ideal Husband* is Sir Robert Chiltern. He is politically ambitious and aside from one lapse of judgement, earnest and hard – working.

Most dandies express interest in women. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth has produced a bastard son and chases several women. In regards to the view of sex, religion had a significant effect on discourse on sex and sexuality. Sex came to be understood in terms of sin that needed to be confessed. Instead of viewing sexual knowledge as a means for pleasure on a par with another basic need like hunger, sex became disconnected from pleasure and was used by the church to control people's behaviour. Sexual attraction to women was considered an essentially male trait and vice versa. Female sexuality received far less attention during Wilde's time and as such is not as prominent in his plays. The Victorian double standard afforded greater sexual freedom to men while chastity was expected of women.

A Woman of No Importance also sheds light on the repression of female sexuality. Because Lord Illingworth is bragging that there is "no woman in the world who would object to being kissed", Miss Allonby dares him to kiss Miss Hester Worsley, the Puritan. Hester holds a rather strict moral code that elevates purity and self – sacrifice, which is why Mrs Allonby predicts that if kissed by Lord

Illingworth, Hester will either marry him or strike him with a glove. When faced with sexual advances, objecting to it as a violation of their purity or marriage are the only two valid options for anyone subscribing to the conventional notion of woman's role in society. Lord Illingworth's attempt takes place offstage, but Hester is clearly not charmed by his advances as she enters the stage "in terror" screaming that he has insulted her. In addition to the fallen women, the dandy, the manly man, there is the angel – wife that seems to comply to the norms of the late – Victorian time and the female dandy who wields power beyond the allowance of a conventional woman.

In conclusion, whether it is the morally respectable Fallen Woman, the New Woman adopting traditionally male characteristics, the dandy who reclaims effeminacy and still remains more effective than the manly man, Wilde's characters largely challenge what it means to be a woman or a man, feminine or masculine. Sexuality in particular was a risky topic, as the range of acceptable sexual behavior was very narrow and there was a strong drive to regulate sexuality, even by legal means.