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Topic:

Gender and Sexuality in Two Plays

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Introduction

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the question of each gender's role in society often centres 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 humour 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 behaviour 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. Gwendolyn is also breaking stereotypes as when her mother tells her to wait in the carriage but she defies her, were as most girls at this time would not even dare to disobey their mothers. A good example of Gwendolyn being assertive is when Jack is made to

propose to her properly. Even though Gwendolyn 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. Gwendolyn 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.

Wilde has presented Lady Bracknell talking about the position of men. She says, in her talk with Gwendolyn house is the proper place for man. In the late 19th century women had reached to the point of giving their traditional place to men, and taking the professional position of men. This bit of conversation reveals women have also begun to move freely in the occupational world. Wilde pokes gentle fun at this side of feminist move. Wilde used Miss Prism as an awakened woman who serves as a governess of Cecily, and writes novels. Perhaps Wilde too wanted to see the limitations of the movement of feministically. The feministically awake and educated women had to cling to the mere job of governess. They had to write fictions. Except this pursuit and jobs of governess those feminist women got nothing significant.

The status of the nineteenth century's educated women remained grim, however, with few occupational outlets, other than teaching. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, combines two

common female occupations, teaching and novel writing, another activity at which women flourished. Prism's confusion between a baby and a manuscript pokes fun at changing ideas about parenthood and child rearing. The misplaced baby symbolized what critics saw as a confusion of gender roles, when women entered the traditionally masculine world of the mind. The plight of orphaned baby Jack illustrates the destabilization of family ties, which in his case are sequentially lost, invented, changed and discovered.

The Pygmalion

The title of Shaw's play is taken from the myth of Pygmalion. In this story, Pygmalion scorns all the women around him and makes a sculpture of his ideal woman. The sculpture is so beautiful that he falls in love with it and it comes to life. By titling his play after this story, Shaw calls attention to questions of femininity and gender. As Pygmalion sculpts his ideal woman, so Higgins and Pickering mold Eliza into an ideal lady. These two narratives show how unrealistic and even unnatural the expectations that society often has for women are. Pygmalion's perfect woman can only be attained with an artificial construct, a sculpture. Similarly, the ideal noble lady of British society in the world of Shaw's play is a kind of fake, only a role that Eliza must learn to play. *Pygmalion* can thus be seen as showing how oppressive unrealistic ideals of femininity can be: to attain these ideals, Eliza has to be coached, disciplined, and taught. She has to pretend to be someone other than who she really is.

The play further explores gender roles with its other female characters. As it is set in the early 20th century, before women gained many basic rights and privileges, the play's other female characters—Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins—are largely confined to their respective households. Nonetheless, they both play important roles. Mrs. Pearce ensures the functioning of Higgins' household and reminds him of his own manners. And Mrs. Higgins takes Eliza in when she leaves Higgins and Pickering, and helps resolve things at the play's conclusion. These two characters thus demonstrate how women might still exert some agency within an oppressive Victorian society. But despite any redeeming aspects to women's roles in the world of the play, they ultimately cannot escape the constraints of their sexist world. At the end of the play, Eliza must choose between living with Higgins, living with her father, or marrying Freddy. In any case, her future can only be under the control of a man of some sort.

She tells Higgins that she desires independence, but although she is a strong character we never see her actually obtain her independence in the play. Eliza is greatly transformed over the course of the play, but it would take even greater transformations of society itself in the 20th century for women like Eliza to have real independence. Shaw's attitude towards women and gender role in general can be explained with several stations in his biography. As I mentioned above, he had an unusual relationship with his mother that influenced his view on women in general.

Not being appreciated and loved by his own mother led to his odd attitude towards women. The affairs he experienced before and during his marriage included much more talking than love-making. He recreated triangles that resembled the one of his parents and Vandeleur Lee, but nevertheless lead a chaste life as his interests hardly ever were sexually. There was for example Ellen Terry, whom he wanted to entice from her husband for professional reasons.

There was always the professional idea in the foreground instead of a romantic attitude towards women, like Higgins' attitude towards Eliza:

“Eliza: One would think you was my father.

Higgins: If I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you.”

he idealized women and created the “stereotype, Woman-the-Huntress” He was comfortable in the role of the innocent man who is escaping the women's grasp. He portrays love and sexuality as something negative and is proud of fleeing it. He constructs Higgins, a man who is also able to get away from women and the idea of romantic love. By doing this and putting Higgins' ability as something positive, he glorifies his own personality at the same time: “I wont stop for you ... I can do without anybody. I have ... my own spark of divine fire. ... I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house. What more can you or anyone ask?

It is obvious that Shaw was either afraid or rejected by sexual love; although he seemed to like the game of making oneself interesting. He used to talk about his attractiveness to women and then at the same time warned them against this attractiveness. However, he only wanted to start this game, but as soon as a woman was interested he retrieved: “Everyone who becomes the object of [sexual] infatuation shrinks from it instinctively. Love loses its

charm when it is not free: ... it becomes valueless and even abhorrent, like the caresses of a maniac.. Only once did he let himself fall into passion and started an affair with Mrs Patrick Campbell. However, after an unhappy ending he was convinced that romance is not necessary and that “the quantity of Love that an ordinary person can stand without serious damage is about 10 minutes in 50 years.

There is a clear similarity between Shaw and Higgins and also other characters of his plays, like for example Dick Dudgeon from *The Devil’s Disciple*. This character is also able to act in an ethical and moral accepted way simply by using his intellect rather than by using emotion like other people do it from time to time.

When it comes to the treatment of women, Shaw had ideas that were revolutionary and ahead of his time. Together with the actor-playwright Harley Granville Barker and the theatre manager J. E. Vedrenne he revolutionised English theatre at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907. Apart from giving more power to the playwright and encouraging contemporary playwrights, the most important point in this case is that it promoted the economic independence of women. Shaw did not see them as beautiful and powerless creatures but rather as huntresses, i.e. “superwomen” with various abilities that are therefore superior to others

However, these ideas and beliefs did not come from out of nowhere but are based on his experience in his adolescence and again the relationship with his mother.

Lucinda Elisabeth Shaw was dissatisfied in her marriage with her alcoholic and irresponsible husband. Unfortunately she projected these traits onto her son and despised not only him but all men, except one: the musician George Vandeleur Lee. She sang for him and the children spent almost their entire time at his place. Later on, when he left for London, she followed him, took her two daughters with her and left her son, the youngest of all her children, alone in Dublin with his father. This being left behind let Shaw doubt his own legitimacy and he was even wondering whether he was named after his father George Carr Shaw or after George Vandeleur Lee.