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COURSE TITLE: MODERN COMEDY: MOLIÉRE TO SOYINKA

TOPIC: PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN TWO COMIC WORKS.

Gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Gender identity is one's personal experience of one's own gender. In literature, there is a trichotomy between biological sex, psychological gender and sexual role. Sexuality can be as important and prevalent in a culture as money, power and time. Gender and sexuality are portrayed in Oscar Wilde's "Importance of Being Earnest" and "Ideal Husband."

Much of Oscar Wilde's "Ideal Husband" provides commentary on the role of women in society. Sir Robert asks Mrs. Cheveley 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. She

takes his advice to heart and urges her husband to continue his public service. 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. 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. Lady Markby and Lady Basildon, and Mrs. Marchmont also comment on the role of women. Lady Markby talks about modern 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 more knowledgeable. Thus, women have a complex role within the play. The coexistence of men and women often seems a constant struggle, but one that is ultimately beneficial to all.

The pursuit of marriage is a driving force behind much of the actions in "Importance of Being Earnest". Similar to many Victorian novels of the period, the play reads as a marriage plot, documenting the errors in social etiquette and romantic upheavals that come about as Jack and Algernon stumble towards the altar. Jack pursues Gwendolen's hand, while Algernon pursues Cecily. Because Jack and Algernon are willing to go to such outlandish lengths to appease Gwendolen and Cecily's fickle desires, engagement—which will ultimately lead to marriage—becomes the primary goal of the main players. Each couples' engagement is fraught with roadblocks, albeit trivial ones. Gwendolen shows hesitance at marrying

a man not named “Ernest.” Cecily shows that same hesitation when Algernon suggests that his name may not actually be “Ernest.” Lady Bracknell objects to Gwendolen and Jack’s engagement on the basis of Jack’s lack of legitimate relations. Meanwhile Jack objects to Cecily and Algernon’s engagement to spite Algernon for “Bunburying” and Lady Bracknell for disapproving of his marriage to Gwendolen. The elderly Dr. Chausible puts off marriage, citing the “Primitive Church’s” emphasis on celibacy, while Miss Prism embraces her spinsterhood as a governess. Despite these trivial obstacles, all couples are finally engaged—Jack to Gwendolen, Cecily to Algernon, Miss Prism to Dr. Chausible. While engagement appears to be the endgame of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is actually the fodder used to entertain the audience. While each couple exhales “at last” with relief once they are engaged, Wilde uses the delays and stumbles to the altar to entertain his audience. Gwendolen’s melodramatic quote, “This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last,” speaks to this idea. While the characters are relieved to be engaged “at last,” like Gwendolen, we in the audience hope that the suspense “will last” so that we can continue to indulge in the characters’ foibles and follies. Unlike the Victorians he depicts, Wilde is preoccupied with the amusements that arise on the road to marriage, rather than marriage as an end in of itself.

Though the title invites speculation on the ideal husband, different figures of womanliness appear throughout the play as well. Once again, we will consider this thematic structure by contrasting a few principle characters. An Ideal Husband relies on a simple opposition between the virtuous Lady Chiltern and the demonic Mrs. Cheveley, the latter's wit and villainy making her a far more pleasurable character. Lady Chiltern appears as the model Victorian new woman, which Wilde elaborated while editor of the *Women's World* magazine in the late

1880s: morally upstanding, highly educated, and actively supportive of her husband's political career. By Act IV, she will also emerge in the role of forgiver and caretaker (again, "Pardon, not punishment, is [women's] mission"), and thus meets the more conventional demands of Victorian womanhood as well. In terms of generational differences, she stands out against the old-fashioned Lady Markby, the embodiment of an older group of society wives.

Lady Chiltern's primary foil, however, is of course the "lamia-like"—that is, half-snake and half-female—Mrs. Cheveley. Whereas Lady Chiltern is naïve, candid, and always in earnest, the witty and ambitious Mrs. Cheveley is characterized by a sort of duplicitous femininity. As described in Act I, she is a "horrid," "unnatural," and—as quickly revealed—dangerous combination of genius and beauty. Having revealed her capacity to manipulate in Act I, the play dramatically unmasks her as a monster in Act III. Trapped by Lord Goring, Cheveley dissolves into a "paroxysm of rage, with inarticulate sounds," her loss of speech giving way to an agony of terror that distorts her face. For a moment, a "mask has fallen", and Cheveley is "dreadful to look at." Her veneer of wit and beauty thus give way to the hidden beast.

We should also note that the play relates Mrs. Cheveley's duplicity with the artifices of the dandy, Lord Goring. Like Cheveley, Goring is artificial, amoral, cunning, and irrational, traits associated with the feminine. The two great wits and most flamboyantly dressed characters of the play, Goring and Cheveley are doubles for each other: their face-off is something of a climax. Indeed, Goring is Mrs. Cheveley's only match because he can play her game of wiles, just as the Chilterns are doomed

to be her victims in their hapless earnestness. Notably, it also takes little for Sir Robert to conclude that they are co-conspirators.

With these parallels in mind, one might thus note that Goring might share an unnatural or monstrous femininity with Cheveley as well: the dandy is, after all, often considered the paragon of the effeminate male. The important difference, however, lies in Mrs. Cheveley's unmasking. If Mrs. Cheveley's mask is ultimately torn aside—in an echo, perhaps, of Dorian Gray—to reveal her cruelty and ambition, Goring largely keeps his on, maintaining his dandified pose for most of the play.

In "Importance of Being Earnest", the question of each gender's role in the society often centers on power. In the Victorian world men had greater influence than women. Men made the decisions for their families, while women around the house. Wilde raises interesting questions about gender roles in "The Importance of Being Earnest" by putting women (like Lady Bracknell) in position of power and by showing that men can be irresponsible and bad at decision-making. The traditional view of gender relation in the Victorian era was that men were active, manly assertive and economically independent while women were assumed to be passive, pliant and independent. The two main male characters, Jack and Algernon, cannot really be regarded as masculine neither do they fit the criteria for what characteristics a stereotypical Victorian man would be. Algernon and Jack "ungentlemanly" behaviour and trivial pursuits can be seen as comic and deliberate in making men seem powerful and serious. Algernon is a little too concerned with clothing to come across masculine. This can be seen when he criticises Jack by saying that he had "never known anyone to put so much effort into dressing and to produce so little effort." Lady Bracknell is strong and blunt even coming across a bit intimidating we get the feel that even Algernon is afraid of her as he would rather

make-up fake man then tell her that "he cannot have the pleasure of dining" with her. Gwendolyn on the other hand can be seen as more masculine than Jack 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, whereas most girls then won't dare to disobey their mothers.

After examining the female characters it can be concluded that the female characters have upper hand than men.