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**TOPIC:**

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN OSCAR  
WILDE'S AN IDEAL HUSBAND AND WOLE SOYINKA'S LION AND  
THE JEWEL.**

**A PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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ELS 240 MODERN COMEDY: MOLIERE TO SOYINKA**

**BY**

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Issues of gender and sexuality have become relevant in literary discourse and criticism which is a reflection of certain aspects of our social realities.

Moreover, the idea that a work of art reveals and is determined by both the writer's view and the socio-historical development of its time, so much so that even those writers who apparently invent their own literary terms still deal with pressing contemporary issues. Thus I have chosen to analyse the works of Oscar Wilde and Wole Soyinka; *An Ideal Husband* and *Lion and the Jewel* respectively in light of the foregoing.

Wilde's plays have been traditionally recognized as satires on his contemporary world of privileged men and women and the conventions by which they lived. His targets are not particular persons but the character types inhabiting the upper reaches of the world of late Victorian Britain and include all relationships, personal and social, the codes that govern them and the principles on which they were founded, especially those of gender identities and sexual conduct. The re-appraising imagination that informs Wilde's plays shapes itself most constantly around the idea of the feminine, which includes the way both men and women think about women's nature and function. Wilde's mockery analyses the conventionality of the idea in all its ramifications and setting it adrift from the security of received wisdom, invites redefinition. Wilde's work may thus be seen as fundamentally subversive, ranging from poking fun at minor follies to a sustained expose of hypocrisy of tragic proportions.

To place Wilde's representation of women in his contemporary social context, it is necessary to take note of the way his age thought about women and formed attitudes to them, to their roles in society as derived from assertions about women's nature, and to the calamities that would follow from failing to conform to those roles. The role of the mother drew particular attention as the highest office a woman could possibly hold. As a cautionary legend, the narrative of the fallen woman, imitated from the French tradition, became a popular one and that of the fallen mother a special variant of it. The popular stage perpetuated the dominant model of the female both by eulogising women who played their appointed gender roles and by condemning those who did not. The theatre made a staple out of the fallen woman in her many forms adulteress, adventuress, intriguer but the fallen mother was a figure of particular menace. Wilde took both versions of the fallen woman and while exploiting the dramatic potential of her story by using it to create situations of conflict, both material and moral, he opened to critical re-examination the dominant moral assumptions underlying

the condemnation of the fallen woman. This re-examination also implies a deeper doubt about the nature of the feminine and acknowledges its power to overturn the settled order of personal relationships, thereby bringing about disorder in social relationships.

To conservative public opinion, the greatest threat to social stability lay in women's attempts to rewrite their roles, denying traditional assumptions about women's nature. The symbol of the perceived rebellion was the New Woman, whose claims to a share of the public world was considered a transgression of appointed gender roles and a perversion of women's innate nature, demonstrated by the New Woman's repudiation of motherhood as women's ultimate goal in life. In her unnaturalness she was judged to be as decadent as those alienated individuals, the unmanly aesthetes, who were increasingly appearing among artists and aesthetes. As with fallen women in general, the popular theatre followed conservative opinion in criticizing and ridiculing the transgressive New Woman. One of its most effective instruments for putting her in her place was the *raisonneur* figure, a man of invincible common sense and wit, whose presence in the plays reflects the widespread opposition of the arbiters of public morality to women's claims of freedom.

In *An Ideal Husband* we follow the story of Mr and Mrs Chiltern, whose seemingly perfect life and marriage are threatened by the vicious Mrs Cheverly, enemy of Mrs Chiltern, who blackmails Mr Chiltern for a scandalous deed he committed years ago. Mrs Chiltern is presented to us as the epitome of a respectable Victorian woman; she adores her husband and plays an important role in his career as his supporter and trustee (though it is important to note that her role in his career is solely done from the sphere of the private home). Mrs Cheverly on the other hand is by no means a traditional woman. She is presented as rapacious and independent and in stark contrast to Mrs Chiltern: emotionally cold. It is interesting to note at the beginning of the play how the main characters are introduced and described. Examining the introductions of Lady Chiltern, Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheverly as well as those of Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring we find quite contrasting usages of adjectives and other descriptive words.

The three main female characters are introduced mainly in terms of appearance. Both Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheverly are described with flower-references: Mabel Chiltern as “the apple-blossom type” and having “all the fragrance and freedom of a flower” and Mrs Cheverly as wearing “heliotrope” and looking

“rather like an orchid.” Moreover, the women are described in generally “soft” terms. To illustrate, the two women sitting together in one of the reception rooms are described as being “types of exquisite fragility.” In Mabel Chiltern’s introduction we can read about there being “ripple and ripple of sunlight in her hair” and her mouth looking like that of a child. Moving on, in Mrs Cheverly’s introduction, we can read that she is extremely graceful in all her movements.

Reading instead the introductions of the men we find descriptions like, in Sir Robert Chiltern’s case, “A personality of mark, deeply respected by the many,” his manner being that “of perfect distinction” and “one feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life.” Moreover, his intellect is mentioned, as well as his will-power. It should be noted however, that also in his case appearance is commented on, though the effect is less superficial and “soft” as the comments of looks are complemented by those of his personality. It is also noteworthy that Wilde writes that Vandyke would have liked to have painted his head whereas Mrs Cheverly is described as being “work of art,” thus we can conclude that instead of being looked at, as in the case of Mrs Cheverly, Sir Robert Chiltern should be painted, which denotes power and status. Moving on to the introduction of Lord Goring, which is rather short, we almost immediately encounter a comment on his intellect, he is clever. Furthermore, we learn that He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage which already in getting to know his character gives him an image of superiority.

Returning to art references, it is quite interesting to contrast the references used in the female versus male character descriptions. Lady Chiltern is described as a woman of grave Greek beauty, Mabel Chiltern as a Tanagra statuette and Lady Cheverly as a work of art. This can be compared to Sir Robert Chiltern, whose description states that “Vandyke would have liked to have painted his head” and the description of Lord Caversham (even though he is not a main character) that says of him “Rather like a portrait by Lawrence,” it becomes quite clear that the references in the introductions of the female characters refer to what could be considered rather sensual, fragile art while those of the male characters are portraits, which one could argue has connotations much more of power and seriousness than of sensuality and fragility.

What comes to mind when examining the female characters in *An Ideal Husband* is how the women are presented to us as quite stereotypical. Woman is always a metaphor, dense with sediment meanings. What stereotypes and

metaphorical meaning can we find in the two major characters of Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheverly?

Mrs Cheverly's character is that of a fallen, dangerous woman. What makes her a threat to male authority is the fact that she transgresses the role she is expected to take as a woman in Victorian society, which was being the perfect "Angel in the house." Already in her description, it is made clear that she does not conform to the customary role of Victorian women, as she shows the influence of too many schools as opposed to the traditional good woman. Her ambition and her talent for partaking in the same scheming power games traditionally found in the closed male sphere challenge and pose a threat to the traditionally divided social spheres of male and female, the public and the private. In order to gain access and reputation in the typically male sphere of politics, she has to be immoral, using blackmail as her way in, while the men can rely on their intelligence. Because of her meanness, she is granted no pardon or salvation, which finally forces her into exile. It is interesting to compare her case with that of Mr Chiltern, who in his past has committed wrongdoings by breaking the law but is forgiven because he, while Mrs Heeley is punished merely for her persona being perceived as that of pure evil and greed with no possible salvation from anyone.

Furthermore, the appearance of Mrs Cheverly too conforms to the stereotype of the fallen woman. She is described as having much make-up on, with highly coloured red lips that match her Venetian red hair and rouge, something which at the time would be considered decadent and associated with immorality and the world of prostitution and acting.

Mrs Chiltern too challenges male authority. She transgresses the contemporary gender boundaries by attempting to control the actions of her husband, who is part of the public (political) male sphere, and through being politically active herself albeit be it in the Women's Liberal Association. Despite her posing a threat to male authority in one way, she falls back into the traditional role of women in another. As an example, in the final Act, she shows no sign of disapproval at Lord Goring's highly conservative and derogatory speech:

"A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, and greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses . . . A woman who can keep a man's

love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them. ”

Seeing as Mrs Chiltern is politically active in the Women’s Liberal Association as well as an advocate of higher education for women it is quite surprising that she does not confront Goring about his view of women as inferior. Possibly even more surprising is the fact that she repeats part of his speech to her husband, implying that she has been enlightened by Goring's words and will thus withdraw her demand that her husband leaves politics because of his corrupt past. She expresses her insight, “You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now.” This passage of the text encourages readers to interpret Mrs Chiltern as having “learned her lesson” on how to properly act as a good woman. Initially she, according to Victorian customs that is, took too much control over her husband by demanding his retirement from public life. Lord Goring’s speech stresses that if she was to go through with her demand she would not only end her husband’s career, she would also “kill his love” for her and basically his whole existence. Taking Goring's words into consideration it is probable that Lady Chiltern starts to question the consequences of her demand as her own life is entirely attached to that of her husband. What sort of life would she have to live if she no longer had a husband who loved her? Would she have to get a divorce, leading her to be seen as a “fallen woman” and possibly become an outcast in the very society that had once admired the perfect life and marriage of the Chilterns? It could be suggested that thoughts like this drove Mrs Chiltern to accept the conventional role of a good Victorian woman, “realising” that she should stand by her husband and forgive his wrongdoings, as her life is secondary to that of her husband.

The robot-like way in which she repeats Goring’s words further encourages this theory. The text seems to display to us how Lady Chiltern (and many other women of Victorian society) were indoctrinated into accepting and adopting patriarchal ideas of what women should be like. In this way the text is ambiguous, as on the surface it seems to support Goring’s patriarchal words, though reading between the lines we find social criticism brilliantly camouflaged by Wilde drawing attention to how hard it was for women to break contemporary gender boundaries, as well as how female independence could be feared as it meant losing all security in one’s life.

We can see how the vision of women and femininity is contaminated by “male defined notions of the truth of femininity.” This statement is interesting considering the theme found in the play of woman as a being controlled by emotion. The women are presented to us as all sharing one underlying fault, emotion. In contrast to men such as Mr Chiltern, who seems to pose “an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power,” the life of a woman (as Goring expresses it) “revolves in curves of emotion.” It is interesting to note though that the play seems to criticise this definition of women as both Mrs Cheverly and Mrs Chiltern transgress this definition, seeing that they both rely on their intelligence in their own different ways. In order to blackmail Mr Chiltern, Mrs Cheverly needs to put emotion aside and use her intellect for her schemes to work. Similarly, Mrs Chiltern uses her intellect when advising her husband regarding politics, as well as in her own political engagements. Taking then into account Goring's words that “It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses,” it becomes evident that both Mrs Cheverly and Mrs Chiltern undermine the patriarchal notion of femininity as being driven solely by emotion. This critique becomes further evident in that Mrs Heeley turns the “irrationality” of women into a power, saying that “The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us.” Of course, this statement could be read as rather derogative, however taking into consideration the sharp woman that she is it could be argued that she, in fact, uses the contemporary view of women and undermines it, attempting instead to use it in her own favour.

Furthermore, we see that verbal and visual systems of meaning are pervaded with patriarchal power and that in such systems woman is “always connected to and inseparable from man.” In *An Ideal Husband*, women’s connection to men is constant, which reveals the underlying patriarchal power at play. Lady Chiltern’s image as the pure and loving wife relies on Mr Chiltern’s need for a moral “white image of all good things,” a mascot, to stand by his side. For her, Mr Chiltern provides a glimpse into the male sphere of politics. By being his trustee and advisor, she is allowed to enter male territory, even if it is only in the private sphere of the home. Furthermore, it is much likely that Mrs Chiltern gains power in her own political aspirations by being the wife of a prominent politician. For example, in Act II coming home from a meeting with the Women’s Liberal Association, she tells her husband that his name was “was received with loud applause.” The text emphasises that Robert Chiltern is highly

respected and admired, something which assuredly profits Mrs Chiltern. Likewise, Mrs Cheveley is inseparable from man considering that the only way for her to gain reputation or any sort of power is through blackmailing a man, using the information she has of his past deeds.

Moreover, even though she is not a traditional Victorian woman and portrayed as more independent than Mrs Chiltern or Mabel Chiltern, she still has to seek financial security in men. It is quite probable that her past engagement to Lord Goring was mainly for financial reasons. In Act III, Mrs Cheveley is having a conversation with Lord Goring about the past.

Mrs Cheveley says “And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the conservatory at Tenby” to which Lord Goring replies “I am under the impression that my lawyer settled that matter with you on certain terms... dictated by yourself.”

Mrs Cheveley’s answer being “At that time I was poor; you were rich”

Furthermore, one of the reasons that Mrs Cheveley earns the fortune she does is because of her former friend and possibly also a lover, Baron Arnheim, left her his fortune after his death, thus it becomes clear that Mrs Cheveley’s position relies on the men in her life.

Finally, both Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley, moral opposites and very different kinds of women, are put in their place by men. It is Lord Goring who in the end of the third act reveals Mrs Cheveley to have stolen a diamond brooch. Equally, it is Lord Goring who talks Mrs Chiltern into standing by her husband again, taking back her demand of his retreating from politics and public life. *An Ideal Husband* is undoubtedly an ambiguous play, it both undermines and supports patriarchal agenda.

*An Ideal Husband* is a play of stereotypes and distinct divisions between male and female authority, as well as private and public spheres.

Characters such as Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley transgress the contemporary gender boundaries, though in the end they more conform than reject the roles they have been given because of their gender. Still, it should be noted that the women, maybe not so much Mabel Chiltern, are still women of strong minds and of intellect. They may be trapped in the clasp of patriarchy but they are well



aware of their situations and rely much on their intelligence, which is how they get away with denying their own stereotypes.

Considering the issue of gender and sexuality in Soyinka's "Lion and the Jewel," we can reduce the scope of our bearings by acknowledging that the participant roles are played by Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi and Sadikou in which the first two are represented as actors, doing something tangible and Sidi and Sadikou, most of the time as characters who are the goals or the beneficiaries of those actions performed by the male characters. Lakunle is convinced in his self-confident way that Sidi is the mere object of his affectations and not equal parts actor and/or originator capable of similar or even more powerful emotion.

All in all, though Lakunle in this opening scene is dealing with love affairs in his attempt to conquer the heart of Sidi, he still uses processes totally detached from feeling. On the other hand, the actions taken by Sidi are not the straight and direct ones which can bring about changes. They are rather actions designated to avoid men's tricks and behaviour, a kind of escape and self-protection against men's preposterousness.

In the processes realized by the verbal items take, burst out laughing (behavioral process), demean, have done, leave, etc. Lakunle is not the goal nor is he the beneficiary. The actions are not directed towards him. The only instance of material process in which Lakunle is the goal concerns marriage:

Sidi: . . .that I was forced to sell my shame and marry you without a price (p. 7)

In this opening scene entitled morning, the analysis has shown how each character, viz. Lakunle and Sidi, has used material processes, processes of tangible actions to express their representation of the world. It can be seen that men are presented as more active and dynamic than women. All men's actions are directed to women who are the goals or/and the beneficiaries.

In the same vein, Baroka' & choices of processes in his exchanges with Sidi, Sadikou and his other wives portray a man of authority and/or action most directed towards Sidi, Sadikou, and other characters. This is exemplified in the following utterances in which Baroka appears:

4) Sadikou: Baroka swears to take no other wife after you

Sidi: Baroka merely seeks to raise his manhood above my beauty (p. 21).

Baroka: Did I not at the festival of rain, defeat the men in the log-tossing match? (p. 28)

Baroka: Do I not still with the most fearless ones, hunt the leopard and the boa at night (p. 28).

Baroka: I also change my wife when I have learnt to tire them (p.43).

All the material process identified in the above utterances can be read as presenting Baroka in a dominating position, the beneficiaries of his actions (swear to take, raise his manhood) being Sidi and Sadikou. He even boasted professing his invincibility in the objective that both women will be influenced which is, to some extent, a selfish attitude.

Another striking observation that is worth mentioning here is the use of material processes of make, do, and teach by both male characters. The angle of a teacher identifies Baroka and Lakunle as professors. This kind of language, he contends, is used in the public domain and that this encounter between professor and students is asymmetrical and helps to keep and build power relation. Lakunle and Baroka are the professors and Sidi and Sadikou the students.

We also find the use of the above-mentioned angle among others {make, do} is a symbol of men's occupation of the public space where men are positioned as professional, and women as learners.

A quick analysis of how the processes 'make', and 'do' are used in the play reveals important findings. Wherever these processes are used and Lakunle and Baroka are actors, those processes express a kind of control, transformation, and domination over/of the female gender according to their projects. But whenever women are actors, it is to express the sexual influence they have over the male. The following is an example of how the process 'make' is used:

6) Sidi: will you make me a laughing-stock? (p. 7)

Baroka: But remember, I only make a pleading for this prey of women's malice (p. 45).

That the play characterizes women as object of male character's attention is evident. All in all, women in *The Lion and the Jewel* do not take initiative, they undergo it. Men take it. They are the doers of the actions. Most of their actions are designed to occupy the public space (teacher and chief). They act overtly. Most of the time, whenever men are actors, the female are the goal and/ or the beneficiary. But when it comes that women take action, it is the negative aspects of it that are shown like in the following reply of Lakunle to Sadiku: And now because you've sucked him dry (p. 38).