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TOPIC

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN MODERN COMEDY

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## **Gender Roles and Sexuality in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel***

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 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. Gwendolyn 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 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.

In the *Lion and the Jewel*, It does not seem that Soyinka consciously tries to make a statement about gender, but he does so nonetheless. On the one hand, he creates two female characters that are sassy, opinionated, manipulative, and independent. On the other hand, both of them are ultimately pawns in the games of men. Sidi does not want to marry either Lakunle or Baroka, but Baroka tricks her, rapes her, and then gets to marry her. She is an object and nothing more. Sadiku is also tricked, and sees her elation over the Bale's impotence and the power of women vanish as his plot is made clear. Women may seem like they have power in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Nigeria, but they ultimately do not.

However, Soyinka seems to blur the lines a bit more by including the rape of Sidi by Baroka. Although he believes tradition is the more honorable and best way to continue past an inhibited colonialism, he also understands that not all aspects of tradition are perfect. I saw his inclusion of this scene in which a forcible sexual encounter occurs to be his acceptance that all societies' traditions have their flaws as well as their strengths. However, all cultures have their own versions of social norms, and as a "Westerner," I accept that I do not know how Soyinka's views of the matters he discusses in his play might differ from mine. Perhaps such an encounter as the sort between Baroka and Sidi might not seem like such a big deal to Soyinka as it did to me, and my reaction is simply an overreaction to a simpler idea.

Lakunle's follies in the play become his undoing, whereas Baroka's strength and titular power as the Bale of the village wins Sidi's hand in marriage, ultimately proving tradition to be the ultimate survivor in this battle royals. However, although the struggle is brought to fruition throughout the course of the play, it seems rather evident for which side Soyinka himself is more of a prominent advocate, obvious by the way he portrays both Lakunle and Baroka, and how they conclude their roles in the play.