

### **GENDER REPRESENTATION IN IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST BY OSCAR WILDE**

Here, Importance of Being Earnest, the question of each gender's role in society often centers 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'.

### **SEXUALITY PRESENTATION IN IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST BY OSCAR WILDE**

Here I will consider the discourses surrounding sexuality in the late-Victorian era and how they developed. I will then analyse the concept of bunburying and how it links with sexual identities, as well as the relation of class and homosociality to each other in the formation of identities. The emphasis of this chapter is on male sexuality, but in subchapter

I will extend the analysis to cover female sexuality as well. First, however, a brief examination of Oscar Wilde's own sexuality and the varied ways it is and was perceived. Wilde's Sexuality Homosexual, bisexual and pederast are just few of the possible labels that have been affixed to Wilde. The facts are that Wilde had a wife with whom he had children and he is also very likely to have had male lovers, many of whom were considerably younger. The different labels just reflect different viewpoints into what is considered the defining characteristic of Wilde's sexuality. Wilde is homosexual to us because of our stereotypical idea of a homosexual man strongly influenced by him. However, for the most of his life the concept of a homosexual did not exist the way it does today. It would be arrogant to assume that our subjective view is somehow better or more correct than that of Wilde's time. As explained in the theory chapter, there is no defining essence of sexuality that could even be known. The problem that arises from assuming Wilde was homosexual is the propensity to draw the conclusion that it will show in his work. This is particularly prominent in readings of *Earnest* and the assumption that there must be "a gay scenario lurking somewhere in the depths of *The Importance of Being Earnest*" has been criticised by Alan Sinfield among others (1994b, vi). He goes on to say that thinking of Jack and Algernon as a gay couple does not really work, as both exhibit interest in women and want to marry (ibid.). I agree with Sinfield on the point that it would be ridiculous to assume that Wilde's works must contain gay themes because he himself could arguably be described as homosexual. I also agree with him that the play does not support a reading of Jack and Algernon as a same-sex couple. However, I think it is too simplistic to assume that since Jack and Algernon display cross-section interest they must be heterosexual, or the presence of heterosexual desire somehow erases the possibility of a queer reading. For me, the interest in a queer reading is showing that Wilders characters resist clear categorisation and cannot be exhaustively described with terms like hetero- or homosexual

Because I do not think it relevant to my analysis, I am not interested in taking part in the

arguments over Wilde's sexuality. However, I do think that the fact there are so many views on the subject shows that there is no essential "core", it is a matter of social constructions and interpretations. Depending on the interpreter's cultural and historical background, Wilde's sexuality could be defined in any number of ways. The discussion over Wilde's Sexuality exemplifies the very idea of non-essential identity I am trying to get across.

#### **GENDER PRESENTATION IN ARMS AND THE MAN BY BERNARD SHAW**

In reading a George Bernard Shaw's play, *Arms and the Man*, one should pay attention to difference between characters of social class and gender or sexes. George Bernard Shaw pictures gender role in characters, Louka, Catherine, Sergius, and other. There is masculinity in Louka's character while annoying Nicola. She reveals her control through her interaction with Sergius. Mrs. Petkoff also shows masculinity in controlling house hold works in absence of her husband Mr. Petkoff. In first act of the play, Raina is threaded by Bluntschli who runs and escapes from soldiers. He threatens a defenseless woman with his gun and allows her to hide him behind the curtain. Raina: Who's there? Who's there? Who is that? A man's voice: (in the darkness, subduedly, but threatening) Sh-sh! Don't call out or you'll be shot. Be good; and no harm will happen to you. Remember. If you raise your voice my pistol will go off. Raina: Yes.

Man: Well, I don't intend to get killed if I can help it. Do you understand that? Raina: I suppose not. Some soldiers, I know, are afraid of death. Man: All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can, and kill as many of the enemy as we can (Act I, 10). Nicola is a principle male servant of Petkoff household and Louka is beautiful maid and Nicola's fiancée. Nicola has his ambitions and wants to be a businessman. When he realized that Sergius has romantic desire to Louka, he decided to have Louka as a customer rather than a wife. So he encourages her to engage with Sergius. "Louka: I believe you would rather be my servant than my husband. You make me more out of me. Oh, I know that soul of yours. I must believe in my own way. [Sergius comes in. he checks himself a moment on seeing Louka; then goes to the stove]. Nicola: oh, sir, thank you kindly. I was speaking to this foolish girl about her habit of running up here to the library whenever she gets a chance, to look at the books. That's the worst of her education sir: it gives her habit above her station.

Louka: without looking at Sergius, begins to arrange the papers on the table.

Sergius: looks at her sleeve and says shall I cure it?

Louka: you can't cure it now.

Sergius: quite sure? [He makes a movement as if to take her in his arms](Act III, 61). George Bernard Shaw believes Nicola used Louka as an object for gaining his wish as Bluntschli who used Raina as an object to save himself. Here, Shaw illustrates the condition of women in society and the way they are behaved by men. Nicola is satisfied for achieving a customer like Louka in his business rather than worry about his fiancée. He is ready to separate from Louka and encourage her to do it only for his ambitions. On the other side, Sergius prefers Louka to Raina when noticed Raina's hidden secret of chocolate cream soldier. He announced his engagement with Louka who is a lady like Raina now. Again, Shaw says that "Sergius utilized Louka as a mean for understanding Raina's secret when Raina was in the way of going out of house. The structure of act II is more serious. Mr. Sergius tries to make love with Raina but she leaves the room and Louka enters. She tells Raina secret to him without saying the name of his rival. Sergius tries to understand it while he accidentally bruises Louka's arm. He apologizes but Louka asks him to kiss

her arm. Sergius: who is my rival? Louka: A gentleman has no right to hurt a woman under any circumstances. I beg your pardon. Sergius: That sort of apology may satisfy a lady. Of what use is it to a servant? Louka: No, I want my hurt made well (Act II, 41). Mrs. Petkoff also shows masculinity in controlling house hold works in absence of her husband Mr. Petkoff. It can be understad of servants's conversation. Nicola: Be warned in time, Louka: mend your manners.I know the mistress. She is so grand that she never dreams that any servant could dare to be disrespectful to her; but if once suspects that you are defying her, out you go. Louka: I do defy her. I will defy her. What do I care for her? Nicola: If you quarrel with the family, I never can marry you. It's the same as if you quarrelled with me! Louka: You take her part against Jlle, do you? (Act II, 25). George Bernard Shaw further shows the vulgarity and impoliteness of the Petkoff towards women when Raina explains that Bulgarians of good standing people in our position wash their really hands nearly every day or the time, Petkoff blames his wife's chronic sore throat on washing her neck every day. "Catherine: Oh, my usual sore throats; that are all. Petkoff: [with conviction] that comes from washing your neck everyday. I have often told you so" (Act II, 38). His lecture on the foolishness of frequent bathing is a sign from George Bernard Shaw that how wealthy men behave with women. For these people there is no difference between high and low class of women.

### **SEXUALITY IN ARMS AND THE MAN BY BERNARD SHAW**

A Feminist Dictionary defines antifeminism as "[t]he conviction that women are not entitled to the same moral and legal rights as men, or to the same social status and opportunities. 'All antifeminist thinkers hold in common the thesis that there are innate and unalterable psychological differences between women and men, differences which make it in the interests of both sexes for women to play a subordinate, private role, destined for wife-and-mother-hood. . . . [It involves] the idea that women ought to sacrifice the development of their own personalities for the sake of men and children" ( 54) . According to Hope Phyllis Weissman an "antifeminist writing is not simply a satirical caricature of women but any presentation of a woman's nature intended to conform her to male expectations of what she is or ought to be not her own.... Indeed the most insidious of antifeminist images are those which celebrate with a precision often subtle rather than apparent, the forms a woman's goodness is to take" ( 94) . However, the term 'antifeminism' has its roots in 'misogyny' which is the earliest form of hatred of women and their subordination. This paper is an attempt to present Shaw's Arms and the Man as an antifeminist play on the basis of above mentioned traits of misogyny and antifeminism.

## II

In Arms and the Man, Bernard Shaw's antifeminist attitude is imbued in the various binaries projected against liberation of female characters, for example, man/woman, home/world, outer/inner and public/private spheres that he projects in the play. He propagates that men work outside and women within the four-walls of the house. While male characters like Major Petkoff, Sergius, Bluntschli and Nicola take up work outside their houses, cities and countries, female characters like Catherine Petkoff, Raina and Louka do not even think of crossing the threshold of their houses. Shaw assigns gendered roles to his characters. He associates men to the world of bravery, war, realism and women to the world of passivity, idealism and love towards men. In his world men order and women obey. Shaw's antifeminist attitude finds a projection in the portrayal of Raina's character. He depicts that women are not able to think beyond their utmost faith in male

supremacy; therefore, they submit themselves to men. At the very outset of the play, Raina and her mother, Catherine Petkoff, are shown waiting for Raina's "future husband", Sergius, whom Raina calls her hero. Raina believes in and has full faith in masculine power. Therefore, she decides to marry Sergius and views herself as a weaker sex. Her weakness envisions in her statement to her mother: "Oh, what faithless little creatures girls are! When I buckled on Sergius's sword he looked so noble . . ." ( 3:127 emphasis added) . Further, Raina's romantic attitude towards life makes her subordinate to men folk. She says to Sergius, "You have been out in the world, on the field of battle, able to prove yourself there worthy of any woman in the world; whilst I have had to sit at home inactive—dreaming—useless—doing nothing that could give me the right to call myself worthy of any man" ( 3:155 emphasis added) . In Raina's statement, the binaries of realism/fantasy, strong/weak, male/female and outer/inner are manifest. By discriminating between genders, Shaw propagates that women's work is not as important as men's. Like a typical male chauvinist, he undermines women's domestic labour. This view of Bernard Shaw is just an extension of Victorian ideal — husbands have to go out to earn while women are supposed to remain at home. Shaw depicts women as liars. For example, Raina Petkoff hides Bluntschli in the balcony of her house, and she tells that there is no stranger in her house when she is enquired by the army officers. Similarly both Raina and her mother invent a fictitious story of the chocolate cream soldier. Further, her mother, Catherine Petkoff also supports Raina's task of hiding Bluntschli and telling a lie to the army officers. Later on, in the play, Raina regrets her falsehood when she tries to deflect her falsehood to Bluntschli: "You were not surprised to hear me lie. To you it was something I probably did every day—every hour! That is how men think of women" ( 3:163) . It is clear from the above speech that even if a woman tells a lie to save the life of a man, she is considered as a liar and her conduct is questioned by the male authority. Shaw expresses his antifeminist notion by portraying that women are born for the entertainment of men. In his opinion, Raina wants to be cuddled. Her beauty and physical charms are the property of man's desires. Raina readily accepts her subservient position in marriage. She likes to be sold to the highest bidder because she is not offered any other choice. In Shaw's opinion women are men-chasers. He shows that Raina and Louka are vying for the attention of men. Both unmarried female characters, viz. Raina and Louka, are caught in the trap of marriage at the end of the play. Raina Petkoff succumbs to Bluntschli and Louka to Sergius. Thus, Raina and Louka are subjugated to men in marriage for their entire lives. Shaw depicts that women are passive because they do not have courage to react against difficult situations except by being emotional and seeing the glory of the world. In his opinion, it is a man who acts. Shaw's antifeminism finds reflection in his portrayal of Raina Petkoff. She views herself as "only prosaic little coward". She does not have faith in her own strength. She worships man and believes in his superiority. She says to her mother, "Yes: I was only a prosaic little coward. Oh, to think that it is all true! that Sergius is just as splendid and noble as he looks! that the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance! What happiness! what unspeakable fulfilment!" ( 3:127-28) . Further, she is not only an object of love but also hatred for Sergius who wants to use her merely for the gratification of his sexual desire. He does not care a bit for the dignity of women. By developing illicit relations with the maidservant Louka he deceives Raina. He subdues both Raina and Louka. Thus, he takes advantage of these two women characters in the play. Shaw portrays Sergius as "the apostle of the higher love" ( 3:156) . Sergius flirts with women and deceives them. He uses Raina and Louka to fulfil his physical and sexual needs. When Louka

protests against the conduct of Raina, Sergius not only decries her but he also calls her “devil”. In his opinion Louka is “an abominable little clod of common clay, with the soul of a servant” ( 3:159) . In Charles Berst’s opinions, Louka marries Sergius and transforms her status ( 35) . His description of Louka is simply unacceptable. A mere transfer of Louka from the one class to another does not make her an emancipated woman. Marxist feminists believe that women of the upper class are also treated as slaves by their male counterparts. Louka’s higher social advancement is, therefore, a fraud with her liberty. Sexual and economic honesty between the relationship of Sergius and Louka is just a sham for their liberty. Again, their relationship is not based on the biological drive as Berst states. Further, Charles Berst correctly holds, “Sergius is subject to lust on the one hand, Raina to her maternal-womanly instinct on the other” ( 32) ; it reveals Shaw’s antifeminism. Thus, Shaw reveals that women are destined to endure sexual exploitation at the hands of men. He reduces women’s existence to satisfy men’s lust and he views her not more than a mothering machine. Sergius’ relationship with Louka reveals his masculinity, and hence his attitude towards her is antifeminist. He dominates her. He forces her to be subservient to him. When Louka tries to revolt against him, he treats her with contempt. He tells her that she is subservient to him because she belongs to him: “Louka! [she stops near the door]. Remember: you belong to me” ( 3:182) . Sergius does not regard Louka as a separate entity. He warns her again when she says that it is an insult to her. He says to her, “Whether that is an insult I neither know nor care: take it as you please. . . . If I choose to love, I dare marry you, in spite of all Bulgaria. If these hands even touch you again, they shall touch my affianced bride” ( 3:182) . Sergius praises her if she obeys him. He condemns her if she protests against his opinions. His antifeminist outlook manifests in his speech when he says, “[again putting his arm round her] You are a provoking little witch, Louka. If you were in love with me, would you spy out of windows on me?” ( 3:157) . Thus, Madonna/Whore binary reflects in Sergius’ attitude towards Louka. He views her not only as an inspiration of love but also as a witch. Sergius’ attitude towards Louka is also imbued with misogyny.