

THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO MODERN COMIC WORKS

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Presentation of Gender in the Importance of Being Earnest

The Importance of Being Earnest is a play about two young men in Victorian England who lead double lives and are eventually caught in their lives because of their love.

While it seems clear to me that the play is a satire of Victorian morals and values in the absurdity of the characters and the plot, what I find more interesting is Wilde's use of gender role reversal. By having his female characters take on the roles of men and his male characters take on the roles of women, it seems to me that Wilde does a good job of turning Victorian values on their heads and showing their faults.

Lady Bracknell seems to embody this role reversal more than any other character. Lady Bracknell has complete control over her daughter Gwendolen's future. She says in Act I, "When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit, will inform you of the fact" (12). While she is acknowledging that her husband should be part of the decision, she places herself before him and belittles him by commenting on his poor health. Lord Bracknell, in fact, never appears as an active

player throughout the entire piece. And from the moment of Lady Bracknell's appearance on the set, she commands and controls Gwendolen (and through her Jack), and also seems to put a great deal of pressure on Algernon (although she gives him leave to "choose for himself" on page 50). Clearly Lady Bracknell values society and its values, saying, "Never speak disrespectfully of Society," but she goes against these values by playing the role of her husband in her daughter's life (47).

The girls Gwendolen and Cecily also exhibit similar reversed roles. While it seems obvious that the two girls take some (masculine) control of their lives by accepting the proposals of Jack and Algernon without consulting their guardians, there are also deeper reversals within them both. When Algernon proposes to Cecily, her immediate response is that "we have been engaged for the last three months," and proceeds to tell him, a completely passive player in this part of the scene, about the fake love affair she was having with him while he was unaware (32). Cecily has the control here of their (fake) past relationship and of their future, with Algernon merely nodding his head and going along with the story—he doesn't even try to take control back for himself.

Gwendolen on the other hand expresses her reversal more through her opinions and values. She describes her father's life, that he is a home body, and that she thinks he is right and manly to be so, going as far as to say, "And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate" (35). This seems to be a clear indication of role reversal in the

plot, where Gwendolen, a woman, clearly states that men become effeminate when they abandon their “domestic duties,” which are usually seen as a woman’s sphere.

Jack and Algernon also take on more female roles in this story, although they are continuously commenting on their own masculinity and being praised for it by others. The play opens with the two of them sitting and waiting for the women (Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen) to show up. And it is not only that they are waiting to chat, Jack is waiting for Gwendolen to propose to her. Instead of actively seeking her out, he takes a more passive role and waits and later he even asks her if he can propose to her (11). Algernon, as I described before, passively allows Cecily to dictate their love for each other. In an interesting moment, the two couples mirror each other.

GWENDOLEN [To JACK]. Darling!

ALGERNON [To CECILY]. Darling!

Illustrating the reversed and confused roles that each character plays in each relationship (44). Is Gwendolen being manly or is Algernon being womanly?

It seems to me that throughout the play all the main characters assume roles of the opposite gender, especially as far as activity and passivity go, and thus create a critique of the societal standards for each gender. Oscar Wilde wanted people to reflect on the relations between the sexes, which were also a very topical issue for his contemporaries known as the ‘separate sphere debate’.

The play makes extensive reference both implicitly and explicitly to this debate, thus conforming to the fashionable discussion of his time. But at the same time it resists the traditional notions that govern men's and women's lives and supports equality between the sexes. For example, at the end of the play, Jack says: 'why should there be a law for men and a law for women? (P. 176).

Presentation of Sexuality in importance of being earnest

Cecily and Gwendolen rebel against sexual roles by mastering the language and being witty-qualities often associated with men-but in fact, they talk nonsense. They are also conceited and vain and ready to change quickly their affections, firstly to a man really named Ernest, showing that they cannot understand real passion, and secondly to one another-they call each other sisters at first, then hate each other. These qualities are often associated with women who are supposed to be volatile and not able to experience friendship like men-women are seen as rivals, which is a conformist view. Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble pretend to be religious, serious and pure but the former is easily distracted (she lost a baby, often quits her job as a tutor to go on walks with Chasuble) and the latter adapts one single sermon to all the different occasions; moreover, they both have sexual desires that they express awkwardly through slip of tongues, for instance when Chasuble says "were I fortunate enough to be Miss prism's

pupil I would hang upon her lips'' (p. 80). Lady Bracknell is portrayed as a greedy and arrogant aristocrat. At the same time we know that she was not born an aristocrat and that she becomes one by initiating the customs and integrating the values of upper class.

TARTUFFE

Presentation of Gender in Tartuffe

Gender played a large role in the text Tartuffe same time period, the reader gets a sense of how much the gender roles didn't change throughout that time. Men were seen as superior and women should be disregarded, along with their thoughts or ideas. The play compared the differences between men and women. They did however have different depictions of how the women reacted in these time periods where gender roles were present.

Tartuffe is a story about a sleazy man, Tartuffe, which acts holy. In reality, he is just a hypocrite. He is invited to live in a wealthier man's home named Orgon. Orgon's family and servants see behind Tartuffe's lies and try to open Orgon's eyes to this man's hypocrisy; however Orgon wants to hear nothing of this subject. Orgon's maid, Dorine, is expressed as an outspoken woman. She has a lot to say and even when Orgon tells her to stop talking about Tartuffe in such a negative manner, she ignores him and continues. Women, especially of lower class, were never to question, argue, or disobey the man of the house. She did not adhere to the typical gender role placed on women. Elmire,

Orgon's wife, also goes against the woman's role in society. Elmire also protests that Tartuffe is a fraud and bad man, but Orgon does not believe his own wife. The fact that Orgon suppresses Elmire's objection toward Tartuffe and doesn't listen to her suggests how Wives opinions' weren't valued. What a woman said did not matter because she was a woman.

Nesci 2Elmire was not given a fair chance to be heard by Orgon, he simply disregarded whatever she said. This shows how a man's gender role was meant to be dominant over a woman. Elmire didn't stop there; she took it a step further by having Orgon hide while Tartuffe made a pass at her sexually. Orgon had to see it for his self to even consider what she had said to be true. Elmire and Orgon's daughter Mariane did show the reader what a woman in that time period should be like and how a daughter should act. Mariane did feel the same way as her mother and Dorine towards Tartuffe, but she didn't tell her father about it or go against what he said. In fact, Orgon tells her, "Yes, Tartuffe shall be allied by marriage to this family, and he's to be your husband, is that clear? It's a father's privilege (65)..." Mariane doesn't go against what her father says. She keeps quiet and knows that if that is what her father wants, then that is what she must do. As for the male gender role, Orgon shows his authority over Mariane by telling her whom she is going to marry. He doesn't give her a choice and she has no say in this matter even though it is her future. When Mariane speaks to Dorine about what her father wants, she tells her "What good would it do? A

father's power is great (70)." Mariane continues by saying, "I've bowed so long to Father's strict control, I couldn't oppose him now, to save my soul (70)." She clearly shows that she knows her place as Orgon's daughter and as a woman with no right to say anything of the matter.

Presentation of Sexuality in Tartuffe

Even though there is no actual sexual encounter in the play, the theme of sex looms large throughout. Lust is the primary vice that both Tartuffe and Madame Pernelle lambast (Tartuffe when he refuses to look at Dorine's bosom, the latter in criticizing the household's lax morality). However, sexual desire also causes Tartuffe's downfall. In actuality, he is defined more by his body for the audience than by his soul. He is a glutton, a drunkard, a slouch, and most of all, a libidinous creature who cannot control himself with Elmire. It is only this final vice that provides the family with ammunition with which to destroy him. The play seems to suggest that sexuality is a natural part of humanity, and one most dangerous when we pretend it does not exist and hide instead behind flowery, empty rhetoric of abstinence and virtue.