

UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF ARTS EDUCATION

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

(THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST AND ARMS AND THE MAN)

**AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
FOR THE REQUIREMENT OF THE COURSE MODERN
COMEDY (ELS 240)**

BY

UZOMA, REJOICE CHINEMEREM

REG. NO: 2015/198818

LECTURER: MR ODOH, ONYEKA

DATE: JULY 2017

GENDER ROLES 'IN THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST'

In 'The Importance of Being Earnest', the question of each gender's role in society often centers on power. 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 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 character or man in the era would be. They are both what people at that time would call 'dandy's'. By definition, a dandy is a man devoted to style, neatness, and fashion in dress and appearance. The dandy represents the ideals of the Aesthetic movement of which Wilde was the face. Wilde's goal was to make his dandies heroes with whom the audience could identify. Unlike the traditional dandies, Wilde's dandies are not meant to be laughed at. Instead, they use their role as truthful observers of society and individuals to point to what is ridiculous or hypocritical, and the audience laughs with them. Algy and Jack's ungentlemanly behavior and trivial pursuits can be seen as comic and deliberate in making men seem less powerful and serious. Algy 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". Algy is dandy, making him unmasculine and a bit of a joke in the eyes of the audience. A time in the play when we see women as having more power than men as in the character Lady Bracknell, she is strong and blunt even coming across as a bit intimidating we get the feel that even Algy 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, were 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, and we see this when Algernon 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 women of the era than are Algernon and Jack typical or the ideal men. Oscar Wilde has created characters that challenge the general 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. After Gwendolyn and Cecily find out that the men they love have been lying to them, they realize that they now have the power in their respective relationships. Cecily and Gwendolyn must now decide when to forgive Algernon and Jack. Now that they have this power, however, they don't seem to know what to do with it and humorously try many different tactics to handle their situation. This reinforces the idea that women should not be given any real power because they don't know how to handle it. Both Jack and Algernon feel the need to uphold the standards of being a gentleman. Meanwhile Both Jack and Algernon truly believe they are protecting their women from a harsh society. Women of high society in the time, not unlike upper class women today, had high standards they were demanded to meet. Lady Bracknell could not imagine her precious daughter being away

from the upscale and bustling life of the city for extended periods of time; there was no way a true lady could cope with such uncivilized surroundings. And also Women in the society were generally not allowed to marry without the consent of their parents or guardians. Many decisions in the lives of the women were made by the men in their lives. For Gwendolen, most of her life is controlled by her mother, Lady Bracknell, who doubles as the paterical figure, while Jack made decisions for Cecily. Cecily and Algernon fall in love and wish to get married, but, before that can happen, Lady Bracknell must approve of them. Despite the fact that Cecily and Algernon love each other very much, Algernon's aunt does not approve until she finds out that Cecily has money. This reinforces the idea that the perfect woman is also rich. Had Cecily been poor, the two would have had to fight to stay together and prove that love can overcome social class, but the two were already perfectly matched in that regard, as were Ernest and Gwendolyn. Despite Cecily's higher learning, all she really wants for herself is to find the perfect man and get married. "I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others" (Wilde 66) "Lady Bracknell: As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?" (Wilde 63) However, in the case of the marriage between Lord and Lady Bracknell, Lady Bracknell seems to have most of the power. In traditional Victorian society, it is usually the man who controls the life of his wife. And also the character of Miss Prism portrays a true womanhood, the way she carries herself from the description from Mrs Bracknell and the cannon, she is truly learned and also the way she renounced Jack's reference to her as his mother and Jack's "Jack: Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow..." (Wilde 69) shows that she knows the moral values of the society she live; It was unspeakable to think of a woman having a child without being married in the era, for women were expected to remain chaste until they married. However, Jack does not see this as a problem, mainly because he's thrilled to have supposedly found a living relative.

GENDER DIFFERENTIATION AND SEXUALITY IN 'ARMS AND THE MAN'

George Bernard Shaw pictures gender role in characters, Louka, Catherine, Sergius, and Raina other. There is masculinity in Louka's character. She reveals her control through her

interaction with Sergius. Mrs. Petkoff also shows masculinity in controlling household 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.

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 shows that "Sergius utilized Louka as a mean for understanding Raina's secret when Raina was in the way of going out of house. Mr. Sergius tries to make love with Raina but she leaves the room and Louka enters, making Raina not only lady-like but also disciplined, since she no longer wants Sergius, there was no need flirting with him meanwhile Louka on the other hand though domineering, still settles for little or insignificant attention. She tells Raina's secret to Sergius 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).

. Louka is angry about the society that leads her to a certain place. Nicola tries to satisfy her that rigid structure of class is part of the natural order of things and people are happy when they obtain their place. He says: "Never you mind my soul; but just listen to my advice. If you want to be a lady, your present behavior to me won't do at all, unless when we are alone. It is too sharp and impudent; and impudence is a sort so familiarity: it shows affections for me. And don't you try being high and mighty with me, either. You are like all country girls: you think it is genteel to treat a servant the way I treat a stable boy the way to get on as a lady is the same as the way to get on as a servant: you have got to know your place: that is the secret of it"(Act III,68). But she is unbending and to an extent rude, despite her low status and she cared less about the people she worked for and was only interested in the pay, Nicola tries to caution her about her attitude because even those from the upper class doesnot have the kind of boldness and sprite she had and he was afraid that her brashness would bring her disfavor with their mistress and that would also severe his relationship with her. 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 quarreled with me!

Louka: You take her part against me, do you? (Act II, 25). This portrays Louka as strong and almost masculine whereas Nicola who turned out a faithful servant is seen as weak.

Catherine is another character who displays control over everything in her household, though she is submissive to her husband. She makes the servants to know their places and even tries to match make Louka and Nicola as man and wife. She initiated the idea of calling her servants through the ringing of a bell, and even when her daughter Raina told her about the Choloate cream soldier, she didn't bother to wake him up or create a scene; rather she played along with her daughter. She takes good care of her home and ensures that everything is carried out just the way she wants it, she pays attention to every little detail.

George Bernard Shaw further shows the vulgarity and impoliteness of the Petkoff towards women when Paul 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 every day. I have often told you so" (Act II, 38). Thereby showing how foolish and conservative the men appeared to be. Even after his wife told him about the bell that is meant to be a medium for contacting the servants, he still prefers the old method of screaming their names and another thing is that he believes that fighting is a sign of masculinity, he is a general and expects Sergius who is also a military to marry his daughter, to him the man being a military and also wealthy; from the upper class grants his daughters safety and happiness and that was all he wanted. Learning that Bluntschli had these qualities, he readily consents to him marry Raina his daughter whereas to Bluntschli being a soldier is not a true sign of manliness and the knowledge of these was what made him flee from the warfront:

Raina: Who's there? Who's there? Who is that?

A man's voice: (in the darkness, shrewdly, 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). While to Mr Petroff fighting shows strength and grants safety, but to Bluntschli even the soldiers are still mere men, they have their own fears and generally they fear death just like every other human and he explains it better by making us to understand that the deal is either you kill or you are killed so most of the killings out there is not to show strength but to ensure survival.