

## **How and why does Oscar Wilde subvert ideals of gender in *A Woman of no Importance*?**

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Oscar Wilde's play, *A Woman of No Importance* reveals society's double standards and problematic attitudes towards men and women in the Victorian Era. Victorian England was a time of great change. In particular, the movement for social change and the way in which gender roles were presented. *A Woman of No Importance* shows a range of ways in which Victorians began to challenge the ideals of gender. The cartoons and criticism Wilde received demonstrated how he broke the norms of contemporary society, and he himself made a significant contribution to the way that society began to change the social status of men and women. At the fin de siècle, there was a very distinctive binary notion of gender which was often referred to as the 'separate spheres.' Benedick Turner stated that 'manhood was defined most of all by professional work, which therefore – to the binary way of thinking about gender prevalent among the Victorians – was required to separate men from women' (2014, p. 486). This acknowledged the idea that at the end of the nineteenth-century the Victorians believed that men and women were meant to do different things (2014, p. 486). Wilde challenges this idea in his play *A Woman of No Importance*. In this essay, I will consider how Wilde transgresses the boundaries which were put in place for both men and women and why he felt it was important to subvert the ideals of gender.

Mona Caird was a novelist in the nineteenth-century who engaged with the women's suffrage movement. She became known for her radical feminist writing through which she fought for equality between the genders. She disagreed with John Ruskin's argument of the 'separate spheres' and used her work to criticise how marriage actually limited and subordinated women. In *Morality of Marriage* she addresses how Victorians considered women to be objects belonging to their husbands. Everything that belonged to women subsequently became their husbands' too: 'if one of them were carried off from her home, and during her exile had children, these children were regarded as belonging to her husband, on the ground that she was in mundium – that is, she was his property, honestly purchased, and consequently her children were his also' (Caird, 1897, pp. 69-70).

Marriage was an important part of the Victorian culture. If a woman had a child and was not married, she was considered to be a 'fallen woman.' Caird points out the negatives of marriage to women and believed they could have a more rewarding life if they did not marry because they could not be anyone's possession. In Wilde's play, he acknowledges this idea that women could potentially live better lives if they did not marry. He uses a character, Mrs Arbuthnot, to demonstrate Caird's idea. Mrs Arbuthnot disrupts the traditional Victorian notion that women had to be married in order to live a better life. Her character represents a 'fallen woman' who has a child out of wedlock, but because she does not marry she is no one's possession. Contemporary plays like *A Woman of No Importance* were being performed which viewed the fallen woman as a threat to a man's world. After Mrs Arbuthnot subtly

tells the story of herself as a 'fallen woman' without Gerald realising, Gerald confesses his real opinion of women who have had a sexual past: 'Would a really nice girl, a girl with any nice feelings at all, go away from her home with a man to whom she was not married, and live with him as his wife? No nice girl would' (Wilde, Act 3. 143). This highlights Gerald's opinion that only 'fallen women' are at fault, and a 'nice girl' would not be capable of doing such a thing.

Wilde uses his play to mock society's confinement of women, and places his female characters like Mrs Arbuthnot, fallen or not, in a role that subverts the traditional opinions that women were incapable of being unmarried. Mrs Arbuthnot is the opposite to the typical fallen woman of the Victorian society. She raised Gerald alone and still held a good reputation. Many critics argue that Mrs Arbuthnot controls Gerald. Christopher Nassaar suggests that 'Gerald [...] is an abused child. Born out of wedlock, he is separated by Mrs. Arbuthnot from his natural father and brought up alone. She is a completely possessive mother who dominates and controls him, establishing a classically Freudian relationship with her only son' (Nassaar, 2002, p. 79). This is a limited point of view because Nassaar did not consider the desperation and sacrifices that Mrs Arbuthnot has gone through. She fought death in order to have her son: 'to bear you I had to look on death. To nurture you I had to wrestle with it. Death fought with me for you. All women have to fight death to keep their children' (Wilde, Act 4, 149). This demonstrates how far Mrs Arbuthnot had to go in order to have Gerald. In *Morality of Marriage*, Caird argues that 'the right to the children has always been enjoyed by or derived from their mother,' which emphasises the right Mrs Arbuthnot had to be the one to take care of her son despite being an unmarried woman (1897, p. 70).

Wilde subverts this confinement of women to marriage when Mrs Arbuthnot rejects Lord Illingworth's proposal: 'Lord Illingworth, no proposition of yours interests me' (Wilde, Act 4. 153). By refusing Lord Illingworth's proposal, Mrs Arbuthnot rejects the idea of becoming the possession of a husband and is able to keep her son, therefore highlighting Caird's argument that women become their husband's property if they marry.

Caird further enforces the negatives of marriage by pointing out the little freedoms they had: 'The wife could not inherit except for her husband, and "if the original title were deficient, she might be claimed, like other movables, by the use and possession of an entire year," she was legally, not a person, but a thing' (1897, p. 62). *A Woman of No Importance* embodies Caird's judgement of marriage because Mrs Arbuthnot wants to maintain her independence and remain her own person. Wilde shows that a woman can still be successful without a man. This subverts the traditional roles of women being just mothers and wives.

Figure 1. Bernard Partridge, (1892) 'Fancy Portrait' *Punch*, 5 March 1892, p. 113



Wilde achieved remarkable success. He challenged his audience with new ideas but was subjected to more criticism. Wilde wanted to produce plays which went beyond the expectations of his time. Nikhil Gupta states that 'Wilde's comedy has long been understood to subvert British culture from within its own constructs,' this meant Wilde received many questions about the type of work he was writing (2018, p. 89). Figure 1 portrays Wilde slouching whilst leaning on some books and smoking a cigarette - which some thought disrespectful. The cartoon by Bernard Partridge states 'Shakespeare Sheridan Oscar Puff, Esq' which indicates how many authors Oscar Wilde represented (Partridge, 1892). This predicted Wilde as the heir apparent to the English stage where he had to take on people like William Shakespeare and Richard Sheridan. However, Wilde did not copy Sheridan or Shakespeare and instead wrote plays which challenged his audiences in a different way.

Figure 1 portrays Wilde as having had 'daintily-gloved fingers,' (Partridge, 1892). The use of the adverb 'daintily' suggests he had small hands (Partridge, 1892). In the Victorian Era, having small features such as your hands would be considered feminine. From

this description, it is clear that Wilde provoked arguments about what British masculinity was. Gupta addresses the issues that Wilde's existence caused for the meaning of masculinity: 'Oscar Wilde's self-presentation through bodily ornamentation [...] provoked uneasy responses from onlookers during his 1882 American tour,' his appearance was questioned by Americans which meant that their idea of British masculinity was also being doubted (2018, p. 73).

Oscar Wilde was arrested in 1895 for homosexuality. Figure 1 was drawn in 1892 and in the cartoon, 'puff' was written three times. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the term 'poof' refers to an "effeminate man, male homosexual," C.1850. Perhaps a corruption of puff' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2000). Does this cartoon subtly mock Wilde as a suspected homosexual man?

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth implies a homosexual relationship with Gerald before realising he is his son. There are many parts where Illingworth infers to his liking of Gerald. For example, he states 'My dear boy, if I didn't like you I wouldn't have made you the offer. It is because I like you so much that I want to have you with me' (Wilde, Act 1. 110). This presumes that Illingworth is trying to pursue Gerald as more than his secretary. Richard Dellamora addresses Illingworth's intentions:

The focus of attention in act one is his decision to hire a young male secretary. This act implicitly puts in question both the routes of class mobility for attractive young men in a hierarchal social order and prompts a post-Wildean, post-Freudian listener to wonder just what interests Illingworth may be pursuing. Illingworth's elusive desires indicate that sexual and emotional ties between males are implicated (Dellamora, 2000, p. 492).

Dellamora's view acknowledges the masculine privileges and authority Illingworth has. Due to Illingworth's social status being higher than Gerald's, it can be assumed that he uses this status to try and seduce Gerald. In order for Illingworth to disprove his suspected homosexuality, he tries to pursue Hester Worsley. The bet he makes with Mrs Allonby is to hide his true self and to maintain his masculinity, 'what do you think she'd do if I kissed her?' (Wilde, Act 1. 111). However, when Hester rejected him, his masculinity is threatened. Wilde arguably demonstrates his own homosexuality through Illingworth in order to show how he has to deceive the public in order to maintain his reputation. Illingworth subverts the ideals of gender because of his questioned sexuality.

Figure 2. George Du Maurier, (1895) 'The New Woman'.  
*Punch*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1895



THE NEW WOMAN.

"YOU'RE NOT LEAVING US, JACK! TEA WILL BE HERE DIRECTLY!"  
"OH, I'M GOING FOR A CUP OF TEA IN THE SERVANTS' HALL. I CAN'T GET ON WITHOUT FEMALE SOCIETY, YOU KNOW!"

There was a conventional fear of female autonomy in the nineteenth-century as a threat to masculinity. A *Woman of No Importance* exploits the concept of the 'new woman' and how women's places in society were established. In the play, it is the women who orchestrate what takes place and how they attack the protected world of men. The 'new woman' was always developing and pushing the limits of what was permitted in the way she behaved and dressed. Clothing changed with the practicalities of physical movement and veered away from the

more restricting clothes. Figure 2 shows assertive female characters accompanied by a man (Du Maurier, 1895). A subtle representation of the threat posed by the 'new woman' is apparent in figure 2 as it depicts two women dressed in masculine clothes, smoking cigarettes (Du Maurier, 1895). Cartoons like this one by George Du Maurier demonstrates the inherent anxieties about the 'new woman' and her transgressive potential. This is shown through the caption, 'You're not leaving us, Jack! Tea will be here directly!' 'Oh, I'm going for a cup of tea in the servants' hall. I can't get on without female society, you know!' (Du Maurier, 1895). This suggests he needs a 'real woman' and not these 'manly' women, if women did not act like they are supposed to then he would not be able to function properly.

The ties in figure 2 which were worn by the women, signalled a change to gender norms (Du Maurier, 1895). The 'new woman' raised questions about her own

gender, but it also provoked issues because a woman wearing a tie emasculated man. Deborah Martinson states 'feminine decadence was seen to threaten masculinity' (2003, p. 176). This is evident in figure 2 because the 'new woman' adopted features of male dress (Du Maurier, 1895). The 'new woman' caused questions about what adopting male clothing would mean for women, and whether through male clothing they would gain male privileges which the tie represents.

Mrs Allonby in *A Woman of No Importance* is very different from the other women in the play. Wilde presents her as a character who sought her own enjoyment for her own sexual freedoms. She is very outspoken which was a characteristic of a 'new woman,' for example she states, 'it is that you have never made love to me' (Wilde, Act 1. 111). It is evident here that she subverts the ideals of women in a Victorian society because she voices her own opinions and what she wants. Mrs Allonby's radical personality contrasts with the strong traditionalist characters in the play. She openly talks about her views on marriage and men, stating 'I don't think that we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married women's property' (Act 2. 113). This demonstrates her feminist way of thinking and subsequently acknowledges her as a woman who overcame her gender norms.

Wilde also explores the 'new woman' through Hester Worsley. Hester demands for equal values of sexual respectability and abstinence for men and women. Like Mrs Allonby, Hester states her opinion concerning gender equality and sexual purity. This is evident when Hester argues that 'it is right that they should be punished, but don't let them be the only ones to suffer. If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other, but don't punish the one and let the other go free' (Wilde, Act 2. 120). This shows Hester to be a 'new woman' because she believes both that men and women should receive equal punishment if they both do something wrong.

Wilde subverts the ideals of gender by presenting characters who challenge the conventional roles in which the nineteenth-century confined them too. *A Woman of No Importance* confronts what was expected of femininity and masculinity. Mrs Arbuthnot transgresses the typical 'fallen woman' and is instead successful in keeping her reputation and her son. She defies what marriage was supposed to give women and becomes no one's possession. Lord Illingworth represents the ideals of British masculinity through his suspected homosexuality which provides an insight into the troubles Wilde felt. Mrs Allonby and Hester are examples of the 'new woman' and how their openly voiced opinions helped to change the way society viewed women. Wilde ultimately assisted with the overcoming of what was considered ideal for both men and women.

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