

# The Transcendence of Female Gender-Role in Wilde's Comedies of Manners

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**Abstract:** In the early and middle Victorian age, the gender roles of male and female were explicitly divided according to sexism, which was improved in the late Victorian period. Most of Wilde's comedies of manners were written at that time, in which the female characters had excellent abilities and advanced thought, which reflected the changes of social concept. This paper will analyze the female figures in Wilde's comedies who dare to transcend the gender roles assigned by society.

**Keywords:** Comedy of manners, Gender role, Oscar Wilde, Victorian age.

## 1. Introduction

Studies about Wilde's comedies of manners over the past two decades have concentrated on the image of dandies or the language used to create comedic effects. Although extensive research has been carried out on the portrayal of female characters in these plays, few writers have explored the difference of the feminist views held by these female characters. Hence, to deal with this problem, this paper starts with giving a brief overview of the social background of Victorian age and then focuses on the analysis of text and plots in order to reveal their various conditions of transcending the conventional female gender-role imposed by society in the Victorian age.

## 2. The Stereotype of Gender-Role in the Victorian Age

At the beginning of the Victorian age, British society was still dominated by patriarchy, which should be attributed to traditional social concepts and legal provisions. At that time, the traditional gender roles were regarded as the arrangement by nature, believing that women were born to be inferior to men. Hence, females were defined as the appendage of males and were called someone's sister, mother or daughter with the ignorance of their own identity. Due to the despise of their working ability, women were confined to staying at home and did nothing but looking after their families. Moreover, British law endowed males with much more rights than females. For example, in the Divorce Act of 1857, the prevailing double standard of sexual morality was illustrated by the different provisions for divorce: a man could successfully divorce his wife if she committed adultery; women could sue for divorce only if their husbands committed adultery accompanied by other domestic violence such as physical abuse. (Li, 2011) Based on English Common Law, upon marriage, women were not legal individuals any more, but automatically lost most of their civic rights, including being prohibited from managing their own property or choosing residence.

Meanwhile, in order to protect the decency and dignity of bourgeoisie, the middle-class who popularized the concept of separating female duty from male scope had to sustain the status quo that man unquestionably possessed authority, as well as his wife and children must obey him. For the majority of bourgeois women, their fates were tightly connected with

their marriages. The reason why women had to suffer the unequal marital relationship was that they were financially dependent on their husbands, which alerted the progressives to chase for financial independence.

In the late Victorian age, the concept of gender roles gradually changed because of economic development and the reformation of law and religion. On the one hand, in the mid-19th century, there was a wave of opposition to these patriarchal practices, which promoted the government to improve the legislation to curb domestic violence and protect female interests. Therefore, parliament passed the Angry Attacks Act in 1853, as well as the Married Women Property Act in 1870 and 1882, giving married women independent property rights and equal civic rights with their husbands. (Li, 2011) On the other hand, by the 1880s, revolutionary advances in scientific research openly discredited Christian doctrine, especially Darwin's theory of evolution, so as to prove that the story of genesis was a mere myth, which led to a decline of Christians in the middle class. Since Christianity who preached that females were naturally inferior to males was questioned, the religious foundation of the unequal between men and women was shaken. Wilde's comedies of manners exemplified below were written in the late Victorian age.

## 3. Female Characters Breaking the Constraint of Gender-Role

### 3.1. Lady Windermere's Fan

Wilde's first comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, focuses on Mrs. Windermere and her mother, Mrs. Erlynne, discussing the distinction between "good women" and "bad women".

Mrs. Windermere is the one who grows up a lot in this play. In the first scene, when she realized her husband's "infidelity", she simply regarded Mrs. Erlynne as a completely immoral and unforgivable woman who was aiming to destroy her marriage. When her husband invited Mrs. Erlynne, which went against her will, Mrs. Windermere immediately left from their home to Lord Darlington's place. Whereas, Mrs. Erlynne found her and sincerely explained the misunderstanding, persuading Mrs. Windermere to return to her husband and children. Then Mrs. Windermere secretly got away from Lord Darlington's place, where all the male aristocrats gathered together, at the expense of Mrs. Erlynne's reputation. Hence, at the end of the story, Mrs. Windermere contradicted her

husband's insulation of Mrs. Erlynne, realizing that the standards of being good or bad should not be simply defined by social opinion.

Both the heroine of this play and her mother are different from other female characters. As for Mrs. Erlynne, she dominates the relationship between herself and Lord Augustus, which is contrary to the traditional positions of male and female at that time. As for Mrs. Windermere, her conversation with Lord Darlington reveals that she subconsciously treats herself as equal as male, expressing her own ideas about society and life, which is opposite to what aristocratic females are requested in Victorian age. Mrs. Windermere also mentions that she never cry or exposes her pain, which is far from the stereotype of the Victorian housewives that they should be delicate and sensitive. At that time, other ladies were accustomed to adultery in marriage, but Mrs. Windermere cannot bear the disloyalty. (Sun, 2020) When her husband has an affair with others, she not only asks her husband for truth, but also decides to leave him.

Nevertheless, due to the historical background, Mrs. Windermere is stuck in the traditional concept of marriage and social opinion. In Lord Darlington's place, she feels regretful and says: "But will he [Lord Darlington] love me always, this man to who I am giving my life?" "Arthur would not take me back...Let Arthur do with me what he pleases", which for one reveals that after leaving Lord Windermere she still wants to depend on another man, for another indicates that she believes her husband has the right to "do with" her while feeling upset about her behavior.

### 3.2. A Woman of No Importance

In *A Woman of No Importance*, most female characters get rid of pure romantic relationships between men and women, possessing more independent personality and dignity. Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is a woman of no importance herself, was abandoned by Lord Illingworth during pregnancy without getting married. When Mrs. Arbuthnot realized that the promise made by Lord Illingworth was nothing but a lie, she determined to leave the upper class and live by herself and refused six hundred pounds a year in compensation from Lord Illingworth's mother, in spite of suffering poverty and hunger, which is far more independent than Lady Windermere.

After many years, when they first met, Lord Illingworth still falsely explained why he had abandoned them, but Mrs. Arbuthnot insisted on refusing to believe any words, and was plainly against Gerard serving under him. At the second meeting, Mrs. Arbuthnot had to reveal in public that Lord Illingworth was Gerard's real father when Gerard was going to kill Lord Illingworth, who intended to insult Gerard's beloved girl, Miss Hester Worsley. For the final meeting between the two, Lord Illingworth expressed his desire to rekindle his relationship with Mrs. Abathnott, but she decidedly refused again and slapped Lord Illingworth on his face with a glove in response to his insult to her dignity.

Throughout the play, Mrs. Abathnott rejects the request for rebuilding the relationship with the man who has cheated on her two times with the wise consciousness of double standards on genders: "It is the usual history of a man and a woman, and the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers, the man goes free." Meanwhile, she holds the advanced view of living as an individual without any gender constraints: "I have knelt in God's house, I have never repented of my sin", reflecting that she seldom feels guilty about leaving home for love or premarital pregnancy, which

challenges the patriarchal tradition in Victorian age.

Miss Hester Worsley is the only American in the play. As a young lady coming from an emerging country, she is destined to take on a new attitude in the rigid and rotten British society. On the one hand, she expresses her opinion on British society in public, which was unacceptable for women at that time. She said:

*"You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep the, quiet for a season."*

Hester points out the problems of hierarchy in the Victorian period, which divides people into different classes and despises labour and self-sacrifice, as well as proclaiming the inclusiveness, openness, and the respect for hard-working embodied in American society.

On the other hand, a glimpse of her distinctive modern femininity can be caught in Hester's conversation with other British noble ladies and Gerard. When she speaks highly of Mr. Abathnott's personality and sincerity, she is euphemistically criticized by British ladies that it is indecent for a maiden to communicate with bachelors, leading to her defence of pure friendship between young men and women. Unlike others, she treats Mrs. Abathnott with love and sympathy, regarding that "in her all womanhood is martyred". At the end of the play, when Gerard barely understands Mrs. Abathnott and forces her to get married to Lord Illingworth, Hester helps him realize that his mother doesn't need a husband to protect her dignity, and persuades them to live abroad.

### 3.3. The Importance of Being Earnest

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, male and female characters apparently reverse their gender roles. The words of all the female characters are as "Wildean" and satiric as dandies who love mansplaining such as Lord Darlington or Lord Illingworth. (Jiang, 2022)

The most authoritative and patriarchal character is Algy's aunt Augusta, Lady Bracknell, who not only dominates social contact and her own family—she always arranges her husband to dine upstairs at the reception, but also overawes her nephews Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing, controlling all the young people's marriages. Plus, in Victorian times, men were supposed to work outside and women had to be "angels in the room". However, when Gwendolen introduces her father Lord Bracknell, she said: "Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man, and certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate", which is quite different from the usual division of labor between men and women in the household.

Moreover, compared with other comedies of manners such as *Love Labor's Lost* written by Shakespeare, in which there are two male characters contending for the love of a woman, in this play, the characters who lead the plots and become aggressive while pursuing what they want are two heroines, Cecily and Gwendolen. And they do not even contend with a man, but just a name. It seems that Cecily and Gwendolen consider Jack and Algy as the appendage of the name "Ernest", and their pursuits never take men's fortune or identity into consideration as normal bourgeois women.

## 4. Conclusion

Above all, Oscar Wilde portrays various and outstanding female characters in different stages of defying the conventional female gender-roles in the Victorian age. Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne are constricted by their duties and social judgement, but still dare to ask for their equality in marriage. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester are completely independent women, thus no one is able to violate their dignity. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, gender roles are totally reversed, which means female characters dominate all the social relationships. To conclude, although there are limitations reflected by their choices due to the historical background, they bravely challenge the constraints imposed by the patriarchy with transcending the inherent female

gender-role.

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