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Oscar Wilde's ideal woman: Constructing Victorian upper-class female identity in Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Younes Poorghorban

Younes Poorghorban is a PhD candidate in English Literature at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, whose research interests lie at the intersection of Victorian literature, ecocriticism, post-apocalyptic literature, and gender studies. Poorghorban is a passionate scholar who is dedicated to exploring the ways in which literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the world and our place in it. His latest publication is "The Abyss of Meaning: Disenchantment in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (2023).

Abstract:
This paper examines the definition of the Victorian upper-class woman in the context of Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan, in light of the prevailing gender roles and conventions of the late Victorian era. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theories of sex and gender, this study investigates Victorian female subjectivity in terms of the power dynamics between men and women. Drawing upon Butlerian analyses of sex and gender, this paper has explored two divergent representations of upper-class female subjectivity in the Victorian period. The representation of intelligible-gendered identities in the Duchess of Berwick is a key point of consideration when examining Victorian upper-class female subjects. In contrast, Mrs. Erlynne serves as an example of an unintelligible-gendered character, allowing for an exploration of the ramifications of challenging the prevailing power structure. In this article, it is demonstrated that Wilde's female ideal is neither definitively intelligible-gendered nor unintelligible-gendered; rather, she is a figure who resists power and reacts to any perceived threats to her social standing. This article posits that Wilde's ideal woman is a semi-intelligible-gendered identity. Furthermore, it is suggested that, despite his advocacy of Women's rights, Wilde still endorses certain gender roles and binary oppositions between the sexes, one of which is the role of motherhood. Wilde illustrates a scenario in which breaking away from these social conventions would lead to a tragic end which no woman is able to escape.

1. Introduction

Many Victorian literary figures, notably Oscar Wilde, have thoroughly investigated the complexities of late Victorian society. Wilde's works often allude to the social standing of the Victorian era, particularly in his dramatic works, which offer a unique perspective on the Victorian social milieu. Belford (2001, p. 11) notes that Wilde "mocked himself and society" in his comedies, which are widely recognised. It must be noted that the nature of fiction is in direct opposition to what is generally known as objective history and truth; however, when fiction is "considered with a view to its limitations, it can certainly act as a valuable supplement to historical knowledge" (Kingston, 2016, p. 10). Wilde's dramatic works are particularly noteworthy in terms of their contribution to our understanding of the Victorian social context, due to his status as both a literary figure and a social critic. His involvement with *The Woman's World* is particularly illustrative of this, as it embodied much of his criticism. Some of his plays intensely reflect the social conditions of his era. They are "essentially ironic exposures of English society" (Raby, 2010, p. 158). Furthermore, the inner relationship of a specific social class in his works can provide insight into the political, social, and cultural aspects of that particular class's life. This can only be examined when it is aligned with the context of the Victorian period.

Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893) is a highly prominent Victorian comedy of manners, in which Wilde "focuses most of his criticism on social behavior and marriage" (Zanini, 2006, p. 92). This play focuses particularly on the relationships of the Victorian aristocracy, providing meticulous scrutiny of many aspects of their lives. Wilde's works have been subject to much scrutiny in regards to the issue of gender politics in the Victorian aristocracy, with his characters often attempting to define their subjectivity within the confines of gender roles. As Stetz claims, "It seemingly has become impossible to study Wilde without considering him in relation to feminist politics" (2004, p. 242). In this study, I endeavour to explore the topic of gender politics for three primary reasons. The first reason is to illuminate the definition of women in upper-class Victorian society which will enable us to understand the gender roles ascribed to them. The second reason is to posit Wilde and his viewpoint towards Victorian women. I aim to demonstrate the repercussions of not adhering to the particular gender roles prescribed by Victorian upper-class society for its characters. The third reason is to illuminate how some specific gender roles become beneficial for a patriarchal, aristocratic, and capitalist society in the Victorian era. As Irmak asserts, "forced genders and sexualities are the basis of Victorian life" (2014, p. 35). The construction of

upper-class female subjectivity is of great importance, as it is a product of the culture, episteme, and social context of the Victorian period. Thus, by identifying these gender roles, we can gain insight into how subjectivity is formed.

The concept of female subjectivity is greatly indebted to the comprehension of certain gender roles which are actively disseminated through discourses in a social milieu. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the interplay between gender roles in order to comprehend the establishment of a hegemony in which all elements are in equilibrium. Gamage has argued that a single gender code of "the sacred duty" (2020, p. 4) is widely exercised in the play under consideration. Through a comparative study, Gamage has illustrated this as a significant role assigned to women, which is often addressed in the context of Victorian literature. In Gamage's study, there is a misconstrual of the role of motherhood as being equated with something that is inherently natural proposing that "motherhood is usually defined as 'a sacred duty' entrusted upon women and is a part and parcel of the civilization of human beings in nature" (ibid.). Similar to the major body of Victorian literature, Oscar Wilde, I argue, represents the role of motherhood as sacred and natural rather than a social construct.

Posing Wilde's ultimate stance on female identity in relation to gender roles in this play is a challenging task, given the dialogical nature of the work. However, "literary criticism has never existed in isolation from the prevailing zeitgeist" (Stetz, 2004, p. 235). Wilde's personal life with an Irish heritage reveals much about his mindset on many issues. Historically, Oscar Wilde was a supporter of women's rights throughout his life. As the editor of *The Woman's World* magazine, he encouraged women to strive for educational attainment and autonomy. "*The Woman's World* consistently reflects an attempt to recognize the historical achievements of women" (Green, 1997, p. 108). On the other hand, as Irmak points out, his works illustrate "the sense of duty that overwhelmed Victorian life" (2014, p. 33). Wilde's mindset appears to be influenced by dominant ideological discourses, which are reflected in his play through the emphasis on the duty of motherhood. This suggests that Wilde holds traditional views of motherhood in high regard.

Moreover, some scholars and literary figures condemn the idealisation of female characters in Wilde's works. Virginia Woolf for instance, criticises Wilde for his idealisation of female characters, "she charged Wilde with confining both literature and women to mere decorative roles" (Stetz, 2004, p. 225). In *The Woman's World*, Wilde states: "Women seem to me to possess just what our literature wants, a light touch, a delicate hand, a graceful mode of treatment" (Wilde,

1888, p. 164). On the other hand, Abdulrazzaq and Abbas (2020) attempted to investigate Wilde's stance concerning female gender roles. It has been asserted that Wilde has astutely delineated the biases of the Victorian period with respect to women, asserting that "he demonstrates the injustice of the Victorian society towards women and fallen woman in particular" (Abdulrazzaq & Abbas, 2020, p. 329). Furthermore, they claim that the marriage of Mrs. Erlynne is "a happy ending … far from Victorian society ['s expectations]" (ibid.). On the contrary, what this article seeks to illustrate in these investigations is that the marriage of Mrs. Erlynne cannot be considered a happy ending.

The Victorian period saw the emergence of numerous debates surrounding sex and gender in the social sphere, as a result of the conflicting discourses that were in circulation. "Throughout time, both [sex and gender] notions have been understood as signs of social status and biological indicators of two different categories marked by distinct features" (Iacob, 2015, p. 69). One of the most often addressed motifs in the Victorian period is that of the fallen woman: "the 'fallen woman' became a traditional motif in the 19th-century theatre in her many facets: fallen mother, adulteress or adventuress" (Iftimie, 2017, p. 341). The term is commonly employed to refer to a female who does not adhere to the conventions of matrimony for sexual liaisons and is thus not considered 'chaste'. The encounter of the dominant power with fallen women is dramatically violent. Auerbach points out that "the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and [a] drowned prostitute" (1980, p. 33). Iftimie analyses this issue and seeks to depict Wilde's stance on this subject. She claims that, "in his portrayal of Mrs. Erlynne as a fallen woman and mother, Wilde both conforms to the stereotype and departs from it significantly, questioning the value of well-established norms" (2017, p. 344). The argument that she proposes appears quite convincing, Mrs. Erlynne then, is the emitome of a fallen woman.

The Victorian period saw the implementation of stringent social and political gender roles. These roles were deeply entrenched in the context of the era. Historically, Victorian society becomes a turning point in which the transformations of bodies into identities through constructing various discourses becomes crucial for the constant demands of the "bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society" (Foucault, 2020, p. 69). This play provides an opportunity to explore the female gender roles depicted therein, and to assess them in the context of Butler's theories. It is not to be taken lightly that gender roles in the Victorian period were neither accidental nor inherent. As

Mansfield suggests, “the gender identity and behaviour you manifest are products of a socially and culturally sanctioned system and hierarchy” (2000, p. 68). The significant object of this study is to analyse the reasons for certain gender acts in the context of the late Victorian period.

2. Judith Butler: A Portrait of Women Beyond Feminism

Feminism and Gender Studies can be seen to diverge from one another in terms of their respective assumptions concerning gender and sex. Feminism posits that sex is a natural phenomenon, while gender is a social and cultural construct. In this sense, gender’s existence depends on the presence of sex. This is because feminist scholars believe that “the body is posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior” (Butler, 2015, p. 30). Following this assumption, sex becomes the cause whereas its effect becomes gender. On the contrary, “Judith Butler’s main distinction and departure point from feminism is in her rejection of the natural basis for the notion of ‘sex’” (Khorsand & Ghasem, 2017, p. 23). She claims that sex is not natural, but rather a product of culture, as language is used to construct gender-based sex, rather than sex-based genders.

Additionally, It can be argued that bodies do not possess a meaningful existence until meaning is imposed upon them. They “figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (Butler, 1990, p. 12). These cultural meanings take an active part in the construction of identities. The identification of the rationale behind certain practices and meanings in the realm of language can be an arduous task, as this must be examined in relation to the power dynamics that create conflicting discourses. “Certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view” (Butler, 1990, p. 22). The identity of women has been seen to vary significantly between epochs, due to the fact that certain social contexts create distinct social behaviours, meanings, and practices. In this sense, “identity is not the expression of a prefigured essence or [a] stable core” (Wehrle, 2021, pp. 365-366). Identities can be presented as homogeneous and constantly stable, however, as Butler argues, “the ‘coherence and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler, 1990, p. 23). In a more tangible sense, the hegemony of certain subjects is largely determined by the attitude of the dominant power, with significant implications.. Therefore, Butler’s ideal woman is constantly changing and she is never stable.

Foucauldian investigation of sexuality in the Victorian period accuses the materialistic worldview that industrialisation provided for the society which entirely shifted the dominant approach towards bodies of subjects from censorship and silencing to "a pure object of medicine and knowledge" (Foucault, 2020, p. 32). As a result of these investigations, the intelligible-gendered subjects came into existence. Butler argues that societies form 'gender intelligibility'. "Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (Butler, 1990, p. 23). Gender Intelligibility is an understanding of the subject's position in relation to the dominant power, with an acknowledgement of the restrictions placed upon their actions, behaviour, and decisions. Power has a tendency to promote gender practices which are necessary for its own survival, while simultaneously eliminating those which could potentially threaten its existence. In this sense, "strict gender norms construct 'intelligible' genders that achieve their 'normality' and 'legitimacy' through their opposition to 'unintelligible' genders" (Carrera, Lameiras & Castro, 2016, p. 4). Accordingly, those subjects who conform to the dominant perception of gender identity are intelligible-gendered subjects, and those who do not follow the gender convention of their own particular time are considered unintelligible-gendered subjects.

3. The Unsettling Battle for the Cultural Definition of Victorian Aristocratic Women

During the Victorian era, representations of women were often based upon social class distinctions. Although "[a]fter approximately 1840, Victorians were engaged in a significant debate over the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women" (Langland, 1987, p. 381), women were under the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Patriarchy was a pervasive force across all social classes, yet the ways in which it manifested itself varied between them. It appears that upper-class subjects were subject to greater pressure on their bodies. For instance, "Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort set the supreme example of domesticity, purity, religious seriousness, and devotion to duty" (Girouard, 1992, p. 52). The efficacy of these paragons is a matter for investigation. The Butlerian conception of gender affirms the presence of gender prior to sex and physicality through a set of socially and culturally significant practices, thus presenting an individual with two divergent paths. They may either accept the dominant gender roles attributed to them or resist them when encountered. In Act I of Lady Windermere's Fan, the Duchess of Berwick and Lord Darlington are presented as acquaintances of Lady Windermere. The Duchess, of high social standing, is

invited to Lady Windermere's birthday celebration. The Duchess of Berwick emphasizes the significance of not including disreputable women in the gathering.

> LADY WINDERMERE. I will, Duchess. I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal.
> LORD DARLINGTON. Oh, don't say that, Lady Windermere. I should never be admitted! (*sitting*).
> DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, men don't matter. With women it is different. We're good. Some of us are, at least. (p. 65).

This addresses the issue of prejudice against women in higher social classes, evidenced by the ease with which they consent and conform to a rule that denies them access to social gatherings if they have been involved in any kind of scandal. This is in contrast to men of the same social class, who are not judged in the same way. Wilde's critique of the double standard in Victorian society is evident in his portrayal of the Duchess. She does not express any discontentment with the status quo, instead, her words are seen as a socially accepted convention. This serves to draw attention to and satirise the double standard, with Wilde not sympathising with it. An examination of the Duchess of Berwick's views is conducted through a series of examples in order to ascertain whether she embodies an intelligible-gendered identity. Upon the exit of Lord Darlington, the Duchess of Berwick alludes to Lord Windermere's liaison with Mrs. Erlynne, of which Lady Windermere is entirely oblivious and is consequently taken aback upon being informed of this. The Duchess of Berwick's counsel to Lady Windermere to undertake a journey with Lord Windermere in order to prevent any further discomfiture or entanglements is indicative of the social reactions of women in the Victorian era, which are paramount in comprehending female identity during this period.

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK. I assure you, my dear, that on several occasions after I was first married I had to pretend to be very ill, and was obliged to drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick out of town. He was so extremely susceptible (p. 68).

It is evident that this matter is socially constructed and accepted by upper-class women of the Victorian era that men are naturally inclined to partake in any type of relationship with women,

apart from their spouses. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that there are certain boundaries to how far men can transgress in the context of upper-class society. The Duchess of Berwick is a brilliant epitome of an intelligible-gendered identity who conforms consistently and regularly to the demands of the dominant patriarchal society. Conformity to the dominant discourses of power is likely to lead to participation in the discourse of power. Exploiting power is largely contingent upon acquiescence to power, thus granting authority to those who adhere most closely to its regulations. Although she is entitled to power and prosperity by birth, her obedience plays a significant role in maintaining one of the highest social statuses in Victorian social structure. Moreover, by becoming an intelligible-gendered character, she can exert "the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies…" (Foucault, 2020, p. 45). Power in this sense creates disciplined identities. "A disciplined person is one who submits him- or herself to the power for a particular way of knowing\behaving in order to participate in that power" (Fiske, 2016, p. 62). Victorian aristocratic men are the most involved in the discourse of power while they are not the most disciplined subjects. I argue that men of the upper class exercise power through the propagation of codes for other people, rather than for themselves. This implies that, while women must adhere to certain gender roles in order to engage in the discourse of power, men of higher social classes do not need to be subject to discipline. Rather, their exploitation of power is achieved through the establishment of social and cultural norms. The Duchess of Berwick is not a creator of social norms, but rather a disciplined reproducer of the same norms which have been constructed by patriarchy and which directly serve the interests of upper-class Victorian men. Investigating these norms presents a certain degree of difficulty. As the Duchess is not the ideal woman that Wilde seeks to represent, it can be generally argued that Wilde fails to sympathise with intelligible-gendered identities.

Bewildered as she is, Lady Windermere asks the Duchess: "Are all men bad?" (p. 68). The Duchess of Berwick's opinion of what constitutes good or bad is largely dependent upon adherence to the rules and conventions of society; that is, being intelligible. The Duchess' lack of comprehension of the fact that she is subject to the same manipulation of power discourse as those she seeks to control is evident in her belief that any individual who does not adhere to the roles prescribed by power is inherently immoral. It is suggested that this notion is exclusive to women, with men being less affected by the breach of dominant norms. These norms are created by power through discourse. Supporting this idea, she states, "Oh, all of them, my dear, all of them, without

any exception. And they never grow any better. Men become old, but they never become good" (p. 68). As Butler stated, human characteristics which are gendered are performative acts, and not a set of inherent characteristics which exist prior to culture and social meanings. Furthermore, "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 4), and the aspects that most influence the characters in this play are their social class since it is frequently addressed.

The Duchess of Berwick holds the belief that men are inherently bad and never improve. This is evidenced by the fact that many aristocratic men disregard the social conventions and gender roles they have helped to create, as they are aware that, unlike women, they can escape punishment for certain activities such as infidelity. It is clear that the Duchess of Berwick's opinion of those who do not adhere to the gender roles that have been prevalent in the Victorian social context is not favourable. These codes, which are expected to be followed by women and those of lower social classes, are not necessarily observed by male aristocrats in this patriarchal society. Consequently, it can be argued that these rules and codes are not strictly adhered to by male aristocrats. Here, two opposing discourses are shaped. As Foucault proposed, the constitution of the family in early capitalist societies has been seen to limit the bodies of its members. However, the patriarchal discourse, which is created to benefit male subjects, seeks to escape the normalisation and limitation of the former discourse. It appears that these two discourses are in a state of compromise. Any aristocratic Victorian man who fails to cope with these two forces would be socially marked.

The Aristocracy of the play is seen as the primary purveyors of the prevailing ideological power. Women of the Aristocracy who adhere to this ideology are accepted as reflections of it, as is evidenced by the Duchess of Berwick's continual compliance. She further encourages Lady Windermere to accept the status quo, she states, "just take him abroad, and he'll come back to you all right" (p. 68). Lady Windermere is still shocked and has difficulty realising that her husband has actually committed such a horrible act, she asks, "come back to me?" (p. 68). The Duchess further states, "yes dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, always come back, slightly damaged, of course. And don't make scenes, men hate them!" (pp. 68-69). The views of the Duchess of Berwick can be seen to reflect the dominant ideology of Wilde's non-ideal Victorian upper-class woman, with her suggestion that women should be blamed in such cases and

her proposal that Lady Windermere should not confront her husband and make a scene. Analysing these views thus provides insight into this concept.

Moreover, those characters who directly participate in the discourse of power are the ones who constantly aim to define womanhood. Shams asserts that "the subject is formed in a relation of fundamental dependency on the others" (2020, p. 74). In the first act, the Duchess attempts to console Lady Windermere while she actually refers to a gender role, she states, "crying is the refuge of plain women, but the ruin of pretty ones" (p. 69). It is evident that the prevailing hierarchical ideology of the Victorian era viewed the ideal woman as one who did not cry. This binary opposition between plainness and beauty encouraged the subject to strive for the ideal of a Victorian woman. What this notion of an ideal woman creates as Butler argues is "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women" (1990, p. 19). The dominant ideology, in order to serve its own interests, attempts to create a unified definition of the Victorian woman which is in line with its objectives and requirements. This definition is centred around the concepts of motherhood and a sense of duty. The dominant power seeks to construct docile identities, docile women. The Duchess of Berwick describes to Lady Windermere that the sources of her knowledge concerning Lord Windermere's are her nieces, she states, "my dear nieces_ you know the Saville girls, don't you? _ such nice domestic creatures_ plain, dreadfully plain, but so good" (p. 67). The Duchess refers to her nieces as 'domestic creatures' proposing that they are obedient to the dominant rules and convention and they seek to become the ideal Victorian women, however, they are 'dreadfully plain' which is stated as the downside of their womanhood. The physical reality of bodies is significant. This is because "the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related" (Butler, 1990, p. 12). The female upper-class body is where power is vehemently exercised.

Following the Duchess' exit, Lady Windermere initially inspects her husband's bank account and subsequently inquires in an intrusive manner regarding Lord Windermere's bank book to ascertain whether he had provided any funds to Mrs. Erlynne. Upon discovering that a substantial sum had been given to Mrs. Erlynne, she deduces that the report of her husband's affair was more than a mere rumour. Lady Windermere confronts her husband and declares, "you think it wrong that you are found out, don't you?" (p. 70), and Lord Windermere responds, "I think it wrong that a wife should spy on her husband" (p. 70). Lord Windermere's use of the term 'wife' serves to highlight a pertinent issue. His intention is not to reprimand Lady Windermere as an

individual, but rather to emphasise the gender role expected of women in Victorian upper-class society; one of silence, non-interference, and compliance. Lord Windermere contributes to the construction of female subjectivity, and as Baudrillard suggests, “all that is produced, be it the production of woman as female, falls within the register of masculine power” (2007, p. 15). As the Duchess indirectly stated a good woman is a ‘domestic creature’. The Industrial Revolution necessitated the consistent reproduction of a healthy workforce, leading to the alignment of domesticity with the need for the dominant power to strengthen the constitution of the family. Thus, the family became an institution which provided the dominant power with a reliable source of labour. Queen Victoria's adherence to traditional values and appreciation of the family may be attributed to the need for a healthy labour force in society. Unity was essential for its survival. Although the aristocracy did not form part of the workforce, they had to contribute to the ideology. A notable discourse among Victorian aristocrats, which necessitated their focus on reproduction, was the importance of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. As Killeen asserts, “Darwin warned that only the fittest would survive evolution, and so only the fittest should be allowed to reproduce” (2005, p. 145). Rather than providing workforce, the aristocrats were more concerned with being the fittest and the most eligble members to evolve the English nation. As a result of such dramatic attention towards the concept of family, “population growth accelerated” (Komlos, 1990, p. 69). When women are domesticised, they take on domestic roles such as being caring mothers. As a result, the workforce can be nurtured where they are the most cared for. In this sense, power “accomplishes whatever aims are in view” (Butler, 1990, p. 22). This is the reason why the Duchess, as the representative of the dominant discourse, seeks to prioritise the domesticity of women.

The Duchess of Berwick serves as a prime illustration of intelligible-gendered identity. Oscar Wilde's writing, however, does not appear to be particularly sympathetic towards the Duchess, despite her elevated social standing. In contrast to the Duchess, Mrs. Erlynne is a character who does not adhere to the prevailing patriarchal discourses of her society and thus embodies an unintelligible-gendered identity. Mrs. Erlynne is the uncredited mother of Lady Windermere who “spends 20 years on the Continent with no visible means of support except her good looks” (Nassaar, 1998, p. 137). For the past two decades, Lady Windermere has been ostracised from high society, and has adopted a new identity, complete with a new name and no familial connections. It is not until the third act of the play that Mrs. Erlynne provides a full account

of herselfwhen Lady Windermere has left her home and gone to Lord Darlington's house in order to elope with him. In order to persuade Lady Windermere to return to her husband before he or anyone else discover, Mrs. Erlynne states:

> You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at_ to be an outcast! To find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don't know what it is. One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays (p. 82).

The departure of Mrs. Erlynne from her husband twenty years ago, accompanied by her lover, serves to highlight the consequences of not adhering to the prevailing social conventions. Although there exists pleasure in "having to evade power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" (Foucault, 2020, p. 45), the consequences of such transgressions are dramatically stronger. Mrs. Erlynne has been ostracised for the past two decades, and has recently re-emerged in England. Wilde does not appear to be wholly sympathetic towards her, as she has contravened the prevailing conventions of Victorian society. In particular, her role as a mother has been severely censured; not only did she abandon her husband, but also her daughter, thus undermining the family structure. No record of Mrs. Erlynne's life exists, save for the information she imparts to Lady Windermere. She cautions Lady Windermere against a misstep similar to her own, which could bring about enduring distress in Victorian society. Mrs. Erlynne was only able to re-enter the upper echelons of society when she altered her name and identity by blackmailing Lord Windermere, the embodiment of the prevailing patriarchal authority. The Duchess of Berwick has achieved a degree of renown and influence by adhering to the prevailing gender roles in society; conversely, Mrs. Erlynne has forfeited her social standing and the possessions that she once held as a member of the upper classes. She is, in essence, an unintelligible-gendered woman.

Butler asserts that those who are unable to conform with the dominant norms "appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain" (Butler, 1990, p. 24). It must be noted, however, that the reaction of power is too dramatic encountering the transgressions that Mrs. Erlynne committed. Shams proposes that the reason for such vehement reaction is that the "subversive enactments of the constitutive norms of identity disrupt the binary

system of gender and allow for alternative gender expressions" (2020, p. 74). It can be argued that gender transgressions are reprimanded by the dominant power for both male and female subjects, yet the consequences for an upper-class Victorian man who has betrayed his wife are less threatening to his identity than those faced by women, which may include infinite humiliation and disallowance from entering society. Lady Windermere remains heedless of Mrs. Erlynne's admonitions until the latter suggests a fresh discourse, which ultimately has an effect on her. She states, "God gave you that child. He will require from you that you make his life fine, that you watch over him. What answer will you make to God if his life is ruined through you?" (p. 96). Mrs. Erlynne's lack of knowledge regarding her own daughter is indicative of her disregard for the sacred duty of motherhood which Iftimie proposed. This duty is of great importance in Lady Windermere's decision-making process. Motherhood is seen as a sacred duty in accordance with God's wishes and is also a tool of power used to establish norms through religious discourse. Oscar Wilde's traditional views on the role of motherhood are a notable shift in his writing. For Wilde, as Rose (2017) asserts, "motherhood is unique, irreplaceable: it is a natural, rather than constructed, commitment; motherly feeling is pre-rational rather than chosen" (p. 129). Wilde holds motherhood in high esteem, and does not condone Mrs. Erlynne's abandonment of her maternal role. Consequently, neither intelligible nor unintelligible gender identities are in accordance with Wilde's ideal of womanhood.

Motherhood encourages the 'domestic ideal' which is "the only acceptable work for women" (Boardman, 2000, p. 150). The consequences of disobedience for a mother of the upper classes are manifold, ranging from disappointment to hatred and humiliation imposed by other characters. It is important to note that the role of a mother is not merely a performative act, but rather an amalgamation of numerous performative acts expected of her. "Failure for the woman to conform to such standards - unmarried women bearing a child or wives that deserted their husbands for a lover - resulted in ostracism and banishment from high society" (Iftimie, 2017, p. 341). Lady Windermere ultimately acquiesces to the role of motherhood, which Wilde perceives as a delineator of vice and virtue; submission to it is deemed virtuous, while deviation from it is deemed vicious. This role is viewed as a divinely-bestowed gift, and any deviation from it is considered heretical. In this sense, Wilde is "an advocate of gender binaries" (Mendelssohn, 2012, p. 155), and in his writings, he "reveals a traditionalist critique of gender politics that reflects his concern over the management of cultural institutions and values" (Mendelssohn, 2012, p. 155). Lady

Windermere requests Mrs. Erlynne, “take me home. Take me home” (p. 96). It appears that in Wilde's view, Lady Windermere was saved just before her downfall, as she contemplated forsaking the sacred obligation of motherhood. It appears that Wilde identifies with a woman who does not transgress all imposed female performances and who does not obey all gender conventions. In fact, Wilde's ideal woman is a semi-intelligible gendered identity; one who resists inequalities until the brink of being exposed to uncontrollable peril.

The portrayal of Mrs. Erlynne upon her return is of great significance. Lord Augustus is particularly partial to Mrs. Erlynne, and he continues to propose marriage to her. Examining this character is essential, as it allows for the exploration of Wilde's opinion on the position of a female outcast in upper-class society. Lord Augustus is not held in the same esteem as his peers in upper-class society. He is the brother of the Duchess of Berwick, who is referenced in the first act. “Augustus_ you know my disreputable brother_ such a trial to us all_ well, Augustus is completely infatuated about her” (p. 66). Lord Augustus, despite his mischievousness and transgression of certain norms, is still permitted to enter upper-class society. This may be due to the dominant power's greater tolerance of male transgressions, either because the role of a mother is deemed more important than that of a father in the family constitution, or because opposing patriarchal discourses prevent the power from taking radical action against male transgressors. In high society, where much money and/or estates are to be inherited, the linear transmission of property from one generation of males to the next is put at risk by a wife's philandering. In contrast, the man's behaviour is of far less consequence. In Act III, Lord Augustus speaks to his friend and gives an account of himself while Mrs. Erlynne is concealed in Lord Darlington's chamber. He says:

> A very clever woman. Knows perfectly well what a demmed fool I am_ knows it as well as I do myself. (CECIL GRAHAM comes towards him, laughing). Ah! You may laugh, my boy, but it is a great thing to come across a woman who thoroughly understands one (p. 98).

Wilde’s portrayal of Lord Augustus suggests that he is not a particularly perceptive individual, and is frequently the subject of mockery from his peers, who refer to him as 'Tuppy' rather than by his given name. His status is markedly different from other upper-class characters introduced by Wilde, and Lord Augustus himself appears to regard himself as a fool. It can be argued that his lack of conformity to the ideal of the upper-class man renders him an object of ridicule even from

own sibling. On the other hand, Mrs. Erlynne is found out and all the gentlemen including Lord Darlington, Lord Windermere, Lord Augustus, and Cecil Graham see her, and instantly, they surmise that there has been a scandal occurring. The reaction of these people is very significant by the end of the third act. "(… LORD WINDERMERE *looks at her in contempt*. LORD DARLINGTON *is mingled astonishment and anger*. LORD AUGUSTUS *turns away. The other men smile at each other*.)" (p. 104). Mrs. Erlynne's fate appears to have been predetermined by the reaction of the characters who embody the patriarchal power structure. No further elucidation is recorded as to whether Mrs. Erlynne proposed any such explanation, yet her eventual marriage to an imperfect husband precludes any notion of a happy ending.

Mrs. Erlynne proposes that she will abandon the country soon. She states, "I am going to live abroad again. The English climate doesn't suit me. My heart is affected here, and that I don't like" (p. 108). The revelation of her identity caused the gentlemen to recognise that, due to the humiliation she had experienced, she could no longer remain within the confines of English upper-class society. This posed a threat to the hegemony of the dominant power. Furthermore, she declared that she would never return to England. Besides, "sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power" (Butler, 1990, p. 41), as a result, either everything must be adapted to the nature of discourse and power, or, the dominant power vehemently eradicates whatever threatens its construction. By the end of the play, we witness that Lord Augustus proposes that he will be marrying Mrs. Erlynne. He suggests, "she is just the woman for me. Suits me down to the ground. All the condition she makes is that we live out of England_ a very good thing" (p. 117). Lord Augustus is cognizant of the fact that, in order to wed, they must forsake the English upper-class milieu. This presents two options: remain in England and be excluded from society, or depart the country and begin anew without any prior standing.

Lord Augustus' representation in the play, alongside the exile of both him and Mrs. Erlynne, indicates that Wilde was aware of the social conventions of English society. This narrative can be interpreted as a cautionary tale; a warning that one should never challenge the ruling power, or else they will be punished, at best with exile. The fate of Mrs. Erlynne, who left her husband and eloped with her lover, serves to support the assumption that Wilde was in favour of some traditional gender roles in Victorian society. Through the text, Wilde conveys a scenario in which the violation of certain social conventions results in a tragic outcome, from which no one is able to escape. Wilde does not appear to align himself with either the Duchess or Mrs. Erlynne,

despite his endorsement of certain traditional gender roles. It is Lady Windermere who is of particular interest to him; she is neither as compliant as the Duchess nor as rebellious as Mrs. Erlynne. Through Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde conveys the potential dangers that may befall women who step outside of the family institution. “Wilde lets slip conservative ideology in his adherence to traditional gender binaries within the confines of the heterosexual romantic sphere” (Cote, 2016, p. 2). He teaches Lady Windermere what to avoid by illustrating the misery that Mrs. Erlynne experienced. The best example that Wilde sets is to compromise with the dominant norms when your social status is threatened. Additionally, the reason why Mrs. Erlynne is never exposed as the mother of Lady Windermere is, I argue, to preserve the sacricity of this divine role, the motherhood. Wilde assiduously defends this role at the cost of Lady Windermere’s ignorance. He rather keeps his ideal character in the dark than to break the value of this role for her.

Lord Darlington’s request of Lady Windermere to leave her husband and accompany him abroad serves as an example of the patriarchal nature of English society, and yet it does not necessarily follow that other countries are not similarly patriarchal. Thus, leaving the country may be seen as an escape from such a system. “Leave this house to-night. I won’t tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world’s voice, or the voice of society. They matter a good deal. They matter far too much” (p. 84). Lord Darlington, in his endeavour to persuade Lady Windermere, is cognizant of the social conventions of Victorian society. Nevertheless, there is a divergence between the two in that he is seemingly unconcerned with such conventions, whereas Lady Windermere is overly preoccupied with them. This disparity can be attributed to the fact that Lady Windermere is subject to a greater degree of social pressure than Lord Darlington. Additionally, Lord Darlington, a figure of great social status and power, proposes that, in the event of an elopement, the couple should go abroad and start afresh, as living in English high society would be untenable in such circumstances.

Conclusion

In Oscar Wilde’s play, representations of upper-class society suggest that Victorian society is largely underpinned by a capitalist ideology which is intertwined with patriarchal discourses. This male-dominated society seeks to legitimise itself through a variety of discourses which are largely beneficial to upper-class Victorian men. As English society is predominantly male-dominated, upper-class women face two conflicting paths in terms of their identities. They are either

intelligible-gendered identities who conform to and comply with the gender acts and conventions or they confront and reject these rules and conventions. As I investigated, the consequences of following these gender roles in the social context of the Victorian upper-class society would lead to involvement in the practice of power. The Duchess of Berwick is seen to uphold a prestigious social standing, as she has successfully embodied the archetypal upper-class Victorian woman. In contrast, Mrs. Erlynne, who has disregarded these regulations and conventions, is depicted as an exile and is subjected to a great deal of mistreatment in this societal milieu. The third way which Wilde suggests is to compromise with the norms and conventions. This is what I call a semi intelligible-gendered identity; someone who corresponds to the social norms and breaks away when she feels secure. Wilde draws a distinction between radical transgressions of conventions and blind obedience to them, and holds motherhood in high esteem, taking an essentialist view of maternal roles. He believes that transgressing these roles disrupts the balance of gender binary politics.

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Younes Poorghorban

Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

Younespoorghorban@outlook.com