

# Wilde's Women - A feminist study of the female characters in Oscar Wilde's comedies of manners: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*

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### Analysis 2.1 *Lady Windermere's fan*

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the first of Wilde's comedies, we are introduced to Lady Windermere, who is living a seemingly perfect life with her husband Lord Windermere. Their harmonious life as well as their marriage is disrupted when Lady Windermere learns that her husband has been seeing a mysterious, much gossiped about, Mrs Erlynne, who later turns out to be her own mother. In this play, two female stereotypes are most prominent, the innocent maiden/good woman and the fallen woman. Both of these women transgress contemporary gender boundaries, each in their own way.

Starting with Mrs Erlynne, we must note that she in fact inhabits two stereotypes, both of which she transgresses. She is at once the fallen woman and the mother. Her rejection of the maternal role is closely intertwined with her status of a fallen woman, as motherhood (together with marriage) was the role that women were given in Victorian society. Thus, failing to conform to the role of traditional mother was considered immoral, a sign of decay. As Sos Eltis states in *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* 'Through Mrs Erlynne, Wilde not only subverted all the conventions governing the behaviour of the fallen woman, but dared to question the sacred status of motherhood as woman's greatest ambition' (Eltis 73). Choosing freedom and individualism over being a mother transgresses Victorian notions of womanhood, through which the text displays that women are more complex beings that do not have to conform solely to motherhood.

With Mrs Erlynne, Wilde breaks the traditional story arch of the fallen woman. In theatre, the traditional story arch of the fallen woman was usually to be rejected and punished at the end of a play, to show that immorality and corruption is unacceptable and will not succeed. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* though, it is rather Mrs Erlynne herself who rejects the narrow-minded and false society. What is more, Mrs Erlynne even ends up engaged. On the one hand, it could be argued that the marriage between Mrs Erlynne and Lord Augustus draws Mrs Erlynne away from rejecting patriarchal norms, making her instead conform to conventional gender norms through marrying a man in order to be 'saved'. On the other hand, it could be suggested that the text in fact does quite the opposite. As mentioned above, the fallen woman would typically be punished at the end of the play, so by breaking the traditional story arch, letting Mrs Erlynne enter a respectable engagement, Wilde challenged contemporary ideas of moral, showing that there need not be only one fixed characterisation of the fallen woman.

Mrs Erlynne further transgresses contemporary gender boundaries in that she does not repent her choice of leaving motherhood and her child behind, which a conventional fallen

woman was 'supposed' to do. In fact, Mrs Erlynne possesses an almost 'dandified' detachment. In conversation with Lord Windermere she says 'Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most' (Wilde 60). The cold, detached way in which she utters these lines are reminiscent more of the witty lines of a dandy like Illingworth, than those of a Victorian woman. In her way of speaking and acting, Mrs Erlynne could arguably be identified as having attributes of a *New Woman*. She may be a fallen woman but the text portrays her as an intelligent woman. She enters male territory several times. For instance, in act two, she shows her knowledge and interest in politics, which was usually part of the male sphere, when speaking to Lady Jedburch about her nephew 'He thinks like a Tory, and talks like a radical' (Wilde 26). Furthermore, Mrs Erlynne is comfortable in male spaces such the home of Lord Darlington where she takes control, comforting and telling Lady Windermere what to do in act three. Mrs Erlynne is also the only character of the play with full knowledge of the situation, which puts her, a woman, at an unconventional point of vantage. It is she who chooses not to tell Lady Windermere that she is in fact her mother, likewise, it is she who knows of Lady Windermere's letter to Darlington and makes the critical choice of not letting Lord Windermere find out. Sos Eltis comments in *Revising Wilde* 'Wilde thus reverses the traditional hierarchy of the fallen woman play, challenging the moral values and social conventions on which it is based' (Eltis 58). The text indeed puts Mrs Erlynne, a fallen woman, in control of the play and of the other characters, male and female, which transgresses contemporary gender boundaries.

Moreover, as in *A Woman of No Importance*, which I will discuss in the next section, also this play comments on the paradoxical hypocrisy of the contemporary society. In *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, Rita Felski mentions the negative culture images of women (38). Mrs Erlynne has been labeled as a fallen woman and is therefore talked about as scandalous and vulgar in the world of the play. She has to live with the consequences of transgressing Victorian gender boundaries in declining motherhood, and in rejecting to conform to the patriarchal society of her time. Ironically though, it is the same society that does not allow her to finally take on the role as mother, as her doing so would ruin her daughter's life because she, too, then would be a fallen woman as the daughter of such a scandalous mother. That is, the only thing keeping mother and daughter apart is Victorian society and its strict visions of manner. Furthermore, it is at the same time a comment on the Victorian double standards between men and women, as Mrs Erlynne could be compared to Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* where the text shows us that his claiming of fatherhood could potentially 'save' his son and the mother of his child from bad reputation, while Mrs Erlynne's claiming of motherhood would put shame on her daughter and ruin her life in society.

Moving on to Lady Windermere we encounter 'the good woman'. The text presents her to us as an innocent young maiden, she is a good wife and a mother. The text also emphasises how she can only see bad or good, thus being quite narrow-minded. It has been suggested that her character works as a 'microcosm for Victorian morality' (Wareham 293), as her idealistic thinking keeps her from learning about the complexities of people and life. The very reason that she cannot learn the identity of her mother is because it would ruin her ideals, something which she would not be able to cope with as being pure and good in

society is what she values the most. Though Lady Windermere is the epitome of a good woman, she too transgresses her stereotype, though not much. Her learning that Mrs Erlynne is not an evil woman, as it was she who helped and comforted Lady Windermere in Darlington's rooms (thus saving Lady Windermere's marriage), make Lady Windermere understand and realise that everything cannot be categorised in good and bad. As Lady Windermere is taken out of her sheltered life, she experiences for the first time the complexities of real life. Though in the last act of the play, we learn that she has not developed at all, when she says 'We all have ideals in life. At least we should have. Mine is my mother' (Wilde 63). This line is quite ironic, as it proves that although her moral sense and understanding seemed to grow somewhat during the play, she is still as resolute and categorising as before. It could be interpreted from the text that this is a mirroring of Victorian society, that it is a blind society that cannot open up for what is underneath the surface of the 'perfect' society.

In *Doing Time*, Rita Felski also mentioned that all vision of woman in a society pervaded by patriarchal power are 'contaminated by male-defined notions of the truth of femininity' (38). In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, this contamination becomes quite apparent. Lord Windermere, for instance, states that Lady Windermere and her mother belong 'to different worlds' (Wilde 66), clarifying that his definition of femininity is that of his wife, a good woman. It is because Lord Windermere's resolute opinion of the good and the bad woman that Mrs Erlynne sees it as necessary that he does not know about his wife's letter, as he is so determined of his (as well as patriarchal society's) vision of female virtue that he would not forgive Lady Windermere after realising that she, too, could transgress her role of a good woman. This is yet another example of how Mrs Erlynne transgresses contemporary gender boundaries, as she is 'protecting' Lord Windermere while convention is that it is the male who takes the role of protector. Furthermore, the Duchess of Berwick's is constantly making sure that her daughter Agatha only interprets certain parts of reality, telling her to go look at sunsets or photographs. Her treatment of her daughter display the Victorian literary and social idea that women had to be sheltered and protected in order to remain pure (Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* 84). Agatha is a 'Lady Windermere in the making', being taught how to behave and act according to the patriarchal notion of femininity.

Felski further mentioned that in a system of patriarchal power, 'woman is always connected to and inseparable from man' (38). Investigating *Lady Windermere's Fan*, we find a reversal of this inseparability. The male characters of the play are in fact established through their relationship to the female characters. Lord Windermere is established essentially as the husband to Lady Windermere. Lord Darlington is introduced to us as coming to see Lady Windermere, not her husband. Even later in the play, he is always present in connection with her, first as her admirer and later as intending to leave the country because of her. Similarly, Lord Augustus is the admirer of Lady Erlynne, and seems to do exactly what she tells him to do. Even when the men are alone, as in Darlington's rooms, their conversations are mainly about women. This reversal of inseparability between man and woman does not mean, however, that the women are independent and free. Lady Windermere feels obligated to either stay by her husband or to escape her marriage directly into the hands of Lord Darlington. Likewise, Mrs Erlynne is economically dependent on Lord Windermere, and

as she seems to have many admirers and lovers we can infer from the text that she was probably economically dependent on other men in her past as well.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* is a play of partial female dominance. It is led by two female characters, one of which claims entrance to the male spheres of politics and men's private rooms. Lady Windermere attempts at transgressing the boundaries of her stereotype, though fails at the end of the play, proving the strength of Victorian society's pressure of conformity, of which Lady Erylne too is the victim in the sense of complete female independency being impossible.