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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* Front picture "A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881" by William Powell Frith, from Google
1. Introduction

There is no doubt that Oscar Wilde is one of the most acclaimed, as well as criticised, authors of his century. To this day he is admired for his wit and sharp dialogue, and his satire. Born in 1854, Wild was a writer of the Victorian Era. Looking back at the Victorian Era through descriptions of life and society an image appears of a rigid society characterised by prudishness, tradition and strict social codes, which is precisely what Wilde commented on and satirised in his comedies of society. Born into a wealthy Anglo-Irish family (BBC) and later educated at both Trinity College in Dublin and at Oxford, Wilde grew up associating with the upper classes. His parents were both intellectuals, his father a surgeon and his mother a writer (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). She introduced Wilde to the world of poetry already at a young age (Sandulescu 53) and it could be suggested that her storytelling ignited his passion for writing, to which he would dedicate his life. Having graduated from Oxford, Wilde relocated to London where he settled down to focus on his writing. In London, Wilde entered the fashionable cultural and literary circles of high society, thus gaining access to the world his social criticism would be based on. Through placing the criticising commentary in between the lines instead of overtly, his comedies of manners (a term I will explain in a later section of this introduction) mocked Victorian society and its values on its own conditions.

The Victorian Era was a time of change and development. The trade markets were increasing, British Imperialism was at its peak and English society lived under strict rules of the proper ”English” ways of behaviour. As portrayed in various literary works of the time, there were many with strong aspirations for social climbing such as gaining wealth, marrying into higher social classes or trying to get a higher education. For members of the Victorian society, reputation was highly important and scandal was to be avoided at all costs. Women of the time were supposed to take on the role of the ”Angel in the House”, following a set ideal of being
“devoted, docile wives and mothers; paragons of domesticity, virtue and humility” (British Library). Victorian women were put in a position of dependency on men. There were hardly any opportunities for them to be financially independent, and being unmarried or rejecting motherhood was seen as a social *faux pax*. Therefore, women were inseparable from men as the only way to live a respectable life was together with a man. Furthermore, if a woman acted immorally (according to contemporary values) with a man, she would be inseparable from him, marrying that same man being her only way to escape the destiny of a “fallen woman”. This is a topic that I will discuss thoroughly later in this essay, as women’s dependency on men becomes apparent in the plays I will be analysing.

Until the middle of the 19th century, it was not considered necessary for women to get an education as they were supposed to marry. However, it was important that women had various skills such as singing, painting and playing instruments in order to entertain both her husband and his guests. In the middle of the 19th century schools such as Queen’s College in London were established which gave governesses better qualifications (Picard). It should also be noted that towards the second half of the century, first wave feminism emerged. Focusing primarily on the question of suffrage and legal inequalities (Rampton), activists fought for more opportunities for women.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Wilde produced the three comedies that I will focus on in this essay. These plays, *Lady Windermere’s Fan, A woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*, are all comedies of manners: intelligent dramatic comedies satirising contemporary fashionable circles of society and its manners, as well as social expectations. This type of comedy is often represented by stereotypical characters, such as the fallen woman, the good woman and the young innocent maiden, all three of which I will investigate in this essay.
1.2 Feminist theory and aim and approach

Rita Felski, Professor of English at University of Virginia and scholar in the field of feminist theory writes in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* that

Patriarchal power pervades verbal and visual systems of meaning. Within such systems, woman is always connected to and inseparable from man. Men’s ability to symbolise the universal, the absolute and the transcendental depends on the continuing association of femaleness with difference, otherness, and inferiority" (Felski 38)

As mentioned in the above introduction, Victorian society was much based on patriarchal power. Women were supposed to take the roles of wives and mothers and keep to domestic life. This lifestyle inevitably kept women inseparable from men, both financially and socially, being unmarried or having illegitimate children was seen as social faux pas. In this essay I will investigate how the female characters in these three plays of society are connected to and inseparable from male characters.

Furthermore, Felski explains that:

The goal of feminist criticism is not to affirm universal woman as counterpart to universal man. This is not only because of the many empirical differences of race, class, sexuality, and age that render notions of shared female experience untenable. It is also because all such visions of woman are contaminated by male-defined notions of the truth of femininity. This is true not only of the negative culture images of women (prostitute, demon, medusa, bluestocking, vagina dentata) but also of positive ones (woman as nature, woman as nurturing mother, or innocent virgin, or heroic amazon…). Woman is always a metaphor, dense with sedimented meanings. (Felski 38)

The metaphorical vision of women is apparent in Victorian literature. It is also apparent in the texts I am analysing in this essay. Based on Felski’s statements of feminist criticism, I will examine how women are used as stereotypes in Wilde’s plays. Moreover, I will examine how the text presents female characters attempting to transgress contemporary gender boundaries. Lastly, I will study how the visions of femininity and womanhood in the Victorian era was based on patriarchal notions, resulting in Woman being defined by Man.
1.4 Material and previous research

My primary source for this essay is a collection of Wilde’s comedies *Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of no Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* found in *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*. Regarding previous research relevant to my topic and approach I will mention three works that contain research on topics in the same field as this essay. As Wilde is such a celebrated and discussed writer, there has been a substantial amount of research done both on him as an author and on his works. Much of the conducted research examines the aestheticism in his works, as well as his sexuality and how it is reflected in his writing. Furthermore, a large part of the research focuses on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. However, I have chosen to focus my own research solely on the female characters in these three of his comedies, as I find this topic especially intriguing considering the narrow role women were given in Victorian society. I chose to exclude *The Importance of Being Earnest* as it is quite different from Wilde’s three earlier comedies, lacking the stereotypical characters of Wilde, such as the fallen woman with a past or cunning villains. Therefore, in order to compare and analyse the plays, I found it more appropriate to focus on the three earlier plays *Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of no Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*.

Dr Sos Eltis at Brasenose College in Oxford has written various articles and books on Victorian literature and drama, Oscar Wilde being is of her special research interests. In her book *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, she examines how Wilde used his plays in order to undermine the conventional values of Victorian society. Her examinations of Wilde’s revisions and redraftings bring forth an image of Wilde as a social critic, socialist and a feminist. Also, Eltis examines how Wilde’s comedies of manners challenge Victorian sexual and social codes, which is of interest for this essay. In an 1998 review of *Revising Wilde*, scholar Karl Beckson strongly disagrees with Eltis, claiming that Eltis is
“contradicting himself” (Beckson 84) (note that Beckson apparently was unaware of Eltis’ gender, assuming her gender to be that of a man) numerous times in her analysis of Wilde’s plays. Furthermore, he writes that much of Eltis’ research, the parallels she draws between Wilde’s plays and those of the French boulevard theatre, for example, are “now generally well known” (Beckson 84) and declares that Eltis “seems to be catching up on recent critical views of Wilde’s play” (Beckson 83). What is more, Beckson criticises Eltis for devoting too little space to dandyism in her analysis of *Lady Windermere’s fan*, writing “To dispose of this concept in such a manner, as though a matter of little importance, reveals a lack of focus in assessing the originality of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*” (Beckson 85). *Revising Wilde* was of use to me as it shed light on how Wilde changed and rewrote many of his characters and their actions. Eltis’ text allowed me to investigate the works of Wilde further than only the final published versions of the plays, making the interpretations of the plays more interesting as we can learn if his female characters were developed to be more independent or the opposite.

Sarika Priyadarshini Bose at the University of Birmingham wrote her doctoral thesis on *Women as Figures of Disorder in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, in which she studies the transgressive women portrayed in Wilde’s comedies of manners. Bose examines the disruptive power of women that was seen as a threat to Victorian society, which was mostly a man’s world, and how it is commented on through Wilde’s genius wit and through the “dandy” who renounces the social confinements of contemporary society, while still thwarting the few women who do attempt at breaking free of the strict social codes. Her text was of use to me as she displays the stereotypical portrayals of women and their power in these plays, which allowed me to further develop the reading of the characters and their relationships to each other, as well as the interpretation of what message their actions might tell of the life of contemporary women in Victorian society.
Furthermore, Kerry Powell and Peter Raby have edited a collection of articles called *Oscar Wilde in Context*, that examine the relationship between the works and ideas of Oscar Wilde and contemporary contexts such as socialism, aestheticism and, of great interest for my essay: Victorian feminism. One of the articles in the collection is *Feminism* by Barbara Caine (289), in which she examines Wilde’s relationship to late-nineteenth-century feminist discussions and debates, highlighting the fact that Wilde’s mother was an advocate of women’s rights and an opponent to the sexual double standards of the time (Caine 289). Caine goes on to discuss two of Wilde’s comedies in which the question of social purity and sexual double standard are addressed, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. Furthermore, Caine finds it interesting that Wilde addresses some aspects of concern to feminists while leaving one very important issue out, prostitution, which was ”the primary focus for nineteenth-century feminist discussions of the sexual double standard” as there was great discussion about the way female prostitutes (really, any woman who was not regarded as chaste, as prostitution was not a crime) could be forced to undergo medical examination followed by detention in hospital for a longer time, while there was no requirement for the male client of a prostitute to undergo any such examination, which was clearly a facet of the sexual double standard (Caine 292). Moreover, in the same collection, there is an article by Joseph Donohue and one by Sos Eltis, both covering the reception and performance history of Wilde’s comedies of manners. Donohue focuses on *The Importance of Being Earnest* (307), while Eltis covers all of Wilde’s five major plays (319).

2. 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 the 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 Jedburgh 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 it 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 daughters’ 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 a 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 grown 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 Erlynne too is the victim in the sense of complete female independency being impossible.

2.2 A Woman of No Importance

Despite its title, *A Woman of No Importance* is a play in which male authority has to step back and make room for strong female characters such as Mrs Arbuthnot and Miss Hester Worsley. It is a play that presents the conventional view of seduced and seducer yet undermines it with a complex interpretation of the power relationship between man and woman. In *A Woman of No Importance* Wilde redefines and challenges stereotypes through the characters of the play. Sos Eltis writes about the play in *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*:

> The play offers many theatrical clichés, stereotypes of the vulnerable woman who becomes a victim of male depravity, the humble and self-sacrificing mother, and the noble son who honours and protects her in spite of her shame. But Wilde subtly recast these conventional elements in order to question the sexual and social mores on which they were based (Eltis 96)

Eltis is suggesting that by using stereotypes but redefining them, Wilde shows how hollow the labels put on "fallen" or "good" women are and how these female characters are much more complex than the fixed characterisations that contemporary society gave them. Mrs Arbuthnot, for instance, is a typical "fallen woman". She is a woman with a past, an unmarried mother - something which the Victorians would have regarded as scandalous (Kohl 220). Yet she is presented to the reader as a strong woman, Sarika Bose goes as far as calling her "the absolute model of a rigid virtue that weakens life" (Bose 155). Hence, Wilde invites us to explore the characters of these women. From the beginning of the play, Mrs Arbuthnot is portrayed to the audience as a good woman. She is aware of her "sins" and speaks openly about them, saying for instance "I am tainted thing" (Wilde 132), yet other
characters describe her as “a thoroughly good woman” (Wilde 110). Furthermore, she does charity work and helps the sick and poor, (even though it is in a sense retribution for her sins, which makes the action somewhat ambiguous).

It is important to note though that even if Mrs Arbuthnot does indeed see herself as a sinner (in the eyes of society), she makes it very clear that she does not regret her sins. In the fourth act of the play she says to her son Gerald:

For, though day after day, at morn or evensong, I have knelt in God’s house, I have never repented of my sin. How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit! . . You are more to me than innocence. I would rather be your mother - oh! much rather! - than have been always pure . . . Oh don’t you see? don’t you understand! It is my dishonour that has made you so dear to me. It is my disgrace that has bound you so closely to me. It is the price I paid for you - the price of soul and body - that makes me love you as I do. Oh, don’t ask me to do this horrible thing [to marry Illingworth]. Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame! (Wilde 134)

This passage of the text starts out as a confident comment on her own situation, being an unmarried mother. In *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* Norbert Kohl comments on the passage “This outspoken justification of her situation as an unmarried mother must have seemed to the patrons of the Haymarket Theatre [the London theatre in which the play opened] like a very progressive plea for a liberal attitude towards such problems” (Kohl 224). We must note though that the last sentence disrupts the declamatory tone of the passage, making it rather ambiguous. Kohl comments ”But the apparent attack on ideal Victorian morality in the form of ‘innocence’ is somewhat neutralised by its final sentence” (Kohl 224). As Kohl suggests, the tone changes abruptly towards the end. Mrs Arbuthnot seems to loose her strength, turning to sentimentality which instead suggests an acceptance of contemporary society’s degrading view of unmarried mothers, yet through various of her other lines in the text she seems to in fact question and criticise the Victorian
disapproval of illegitimacy and treatment of “fallen women” a treatment of which she has personally been the victim. Kohl writes:

The idealisation of marriage and of pre-marital chastity was counterbalanced by scorn for the fallen woman, who was rejected by society and often could escape only through prostitution or suicide. Mrs Arbuthnot accuses Lord Illingworth of having had a ‘life of joy, and pleasure, and success’ while she has had to endure nothing but sorrow. (238)

As Kohl remarks, Mrs Arbuthnot has been living a life of shame and isolation while the father of her child has been able to live his life without any complications, due to the fact that he is a man. When her son Gerald wants her to marry Lord Illingworth so that atonement can be made (Wilde 130), Mrs Arbuthnot refuses, saying to her son:

You talk of atonement for a wrong done. What atonement can be made to me? There is no atonement possible. I am disgraced; he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and a woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending.

The woman suffers. The man goes free. (Wilde 131)

Through refusing to marry Lord Illingworth Mrs Arbuthnot rejects convention. She could marry the father of her child in order to become ”respectable” again but she refuses to do so, choosing instead to be alone and take care of her son independently. Later in the text, in Act III, we learn that Mrs Arbuthnot rejected patriarchal power already in her younger years. The mother of Illingworth had offered her six hundred a year (Wilde 106), which Mrs Arbuthnot refused to accept. In a real world, accepting the money had most probably made Mrs Arbuthnot’s life easier, financially at least, though it would have her dependent on the man who had betrayed her. Accepting the six hundred a year would thus keep her inseparable from Illingworth not only mentally and socially as she would forever be a ”fallen woman”, but she would then also be financially in his clasp.

Wilde also makes the character Hester Worsley comment on the double standard of Victorian society when speaking of Lord Henry Weston:
Lord Henry Weston! I remember him, Lady Hunstanton. A man with a hideous smile and a hideous past. He is asked everywhere. No dinner-party is complete without him. What of those whose ruin is due to him? They are outcasts. They are nameless. If you met them in the street you would turn your head away. I don’t complain of their punishment. Let all women who have sinned be punished. (Wilde 96)

Hester goes on to say that:

If a man and a woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there . . . don’t punish the one and let the other go free. Don’t have one law for men and another for women . . . till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust (Wilde 97)

In these speeches, Hester transgresses Victorian gender boundaries in that she overtly expresses that men and women are to be treated equally. However, similar to Mrs Arbuthnot, Hester also finishes the first (the speech above ending with ”Let all women who have sinned be punished”) with an ambiguous, sarcastic statement contradicting her critique of the double moral. We can identify a pattern in the text in which female characters seem to add emancipating ends to their manifestos of female equality. It could be suggested that this is Wilde’s way of showing that even strong minded-women of the time could not fully express their opinions, possibly out of fear of how they would be treated if they were to completely reject the patriarchal, social ”rules” of the era. Thus, even though Mrs Arbuthnot and Hester are examples of strong women who transgress contemporary gender boundaries, these characters are at the same time examples of ”good women” such as Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. These stereotypical ”good women” criticise those who have sinned but are themselves complying with social expectations and sometimes rather narrow-minded (take for example Hester and her opinion of punishment being right to women who have ”sinned”). It is a stereotypical character based on a patriarchal notion of femininity, the ”ideal of the obedient and virtuous wife, who knows her place . . . brings up her host of children in the true Christian spirit, and provides a
refuge for her husband from the pressures of his work.” (Kohl 218). Mrs Arbuthnot and Hester undoubtedly challenge this stereotype, though they do not completely reject it.

Furthermore, the text offers intriguing reversals of contemporary notions of gender. In the first act, traditional Victorian roles of man and woman are reversed in Mrs Allonby’s long monologue about what the ideal man should be like.

"He should persistently compromise us in public, and treat us with absolute respect when we are alone. And yet he should be always ready to have a perfectly terrible scene, whenever we want one, and to become miserable, absolutely miserable, at a moment’s notice, and to overwhelm us with just reproaches in less than twenty minutes, and to be positively violent at the end of half an hour, and to leave us for ever at a quarter to eight, when we have to go and dress for dinner. And when, after that, one has seen him for really the last time, and he has refused to take back the little things he has given one, and promised never to communicate with one again, or to write one any foolish letters, he should be perfectly broken-hearted, and telegraph to one all day long, and send one little notes every half-hour by a private hansom, and dine quite alone at the club, so that every one should know how unhappy he was. And after a whole dreadful week, during which one has gone about everywhere with one’s husband, just to show how absolutely lonely one was, he may be given a third last parting, in the evening, and then, if his conduct has been quite irreproachable, and one has behaved really badly to him, he should be allowed to admit that he has been entirely in the wrong, and when he has admitted that, it becomes a woman’s duty to forgive, and one can do it all over again from the beginning, with variations.” (Wilde 93-94)

Contrary to 19th-century ideas of gender and marriage, Mrs Allonby suggests in a quite comical way, that the “ideal man” should be, as Kohl remarks, "a sort of plaything at the mercy of his wife’s every whim” (Kohl 237). The text is inviting its readers to imagine a
world in which patriarchy does not rule society and women, a world in which the roles are reversed and women control men.

Rita Felski argues that within patriarchal systems “woman is always connected to and inseparable from man” (Felski 38), investigating this connection in *A Woman of No Importance* is intriguing as the text invites us to see that this connection and inseparability is indeed very true, at the same time as it highlights the connection through including several male characters whose identities are established predominantly by their connection to female characters. The most obvious example is perhaps Sir John, who has no lines of his own and is only mentioned in connection with his wife who treats him like a child that could hardly survive without her. Another is Gerald Arbuthnot, who would not exist without his ever-present mother who. Even though he is a grown man, she seems to have full control him. Additionally, the characters Mr Kelvil and Mr Daubeny, though men of respectable professions, are established solely in the female sphere of the home. Mr Daubeny for example, has practically no life of his own as he spends most of his time taking care of, or speaking of, his sick wife. Finally, even Lord Illingworth, who is presented as an immoral dandy is in constant relation to female characters in this play. First, as the betraying lover of Mrs Arbuthnot, then as the rejected seducer of Hester and in the end his struggle to make things right and step into the role of being a father is destructed by female characters. Though yet again it must be said that even if the play certainly offers female power and men as inseparable from women instead of the other way around, it could *still* be argued that the women of the play are inseparable from man. Hester, who is one of the strongest female characters of the play, still ends up belonging to Gerald, the man who ”saved” her from Illingworth and who will now provide her with a secure life as his wife. Moreover, Mrs Arbuthnot is forever inseparable from man as her once innocent love for Illingworth has put a permanent label on her as a fallen (though good) woman.
Moreover, in contrast to *An Ideal Husband* in which women have essentially no access to male spheres and public spheres, in *A Woman of No Importance*, it is the men who reside in the female domestic sphere of the home. The play starts in the house of Lady Hunstanton, where there is no Mr Hunstanton to be seen. Likewise, we also visit the house of Mrs Arbuthnot where, too, there is no man of the house. It is thus the men who visit the properties under female control, only as guests. The women gain power from residing in territories that generally have connotations of femininity, which is perhaps why the women in the play speak so freely about their position in society and of men. In Act II Mrs Allonby says "I don’t think that we [women] should ever be spoken of as other people’s property. All men are married women’s property . . . But we don’t belong to any one.” (Wilde 89). Mrs Allonby is undoubtedly promoting a dominant position for women, a position strengthened by the fact that the play is set in the domestic sphere. The dominant position of women in this play is further confirmed by the fact that it is the women who move the play forward. It is Lady Hunstanton who has brought the female and the male guests, together in her home. Likewise, it is the command of Mrs Arbuthnot that obstructs her son’s chance of getting a higher business position. Also, at the end of the play, Hester is telling Mrs Arbuthnot to leave Illingworth and instead go with Hester as there "are other countries than England" (Wilde 135), implying that they could return to American together. In this case, Hester would be the one "saving” both Gerald and his mother from the shallow society of London, taking them both with her home. We see, thus, that is is the women in the text who are responsible for all the critical social moves of the play.

### 2.3 An Ideal Husband

In *An Ideal Husband* we follow the story of Mr and Mrs Chiltern, whose seemingly perfect life and marriage are threatened by the vicious Mrs Cheveley, enemy of Mrs Chiltern, who blackmails Mr Chiltern for a scandalous deed he committed years ago. Mrs Chiltern is
presented to us as the epitome of a respectable Victorian woman; she adores her husband and plays an important role in his career as his supporter and trustee (though it is important to note that her role in his career is solely done from the sphere of the private home). Mrs Cheveley on the other hand is by no means a traditional woman. She is presented as rapacious and independent and in stark contrast to Mrs Chiltern: emotionally cold. It is interesting to note at the beginning of the play how the main characters are introduced and described. Examining the introductions of Lady Chiltern, Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley as well as those of Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring we find quite contrasting usages of adjectives and other descriptive words.

The three main female characters are introduced mainly in terms of appearance. Both Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley are described with flower-references: Mabel Chiltern as "the apple-blossom type" and having "all the fragrance and freedom of a flower" (Wilde 148) and Mrs Cheveley as wearing "heliotrope" and looking "rather like an orchid" (Wilde 149). Moreover, the women are described in generally "soft" terms. To illustrate, the two women sitting together in one of the reception rooms are described as being "types of exquisite fragility" (Wilde 146). In Mabel Chiltern’s introduction we can read about there being "ripple and ripple of sunlight in her hair" and her mouth looking like that of a child (Wilde 148). Moving on, in Mrs Cheveley’s introduction, we can read that she is "extremely graceful" in all her movements.

Reading instead the introductions of the men we find descriptions like, in Sir Robert Chiltern’s case, "A personality of mark, deeply respected by the many", his manner being that "of perfect distinction" and "one feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life" (Wilde 150). Moreover, his intellect is mentioned, as well as his will-power (Wilde 151). It should be noted however, that also in his case appearance is commented on, though the effect is less superficial and "soft" as the comments of looks are complemented by those
of his personality. It is also noteworthy that Wilde writes that "Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head" (Wilde 151) whereas Mrs Cheveley is described as being "a work of art" (Wilde 149), thus we can conclude that instead of being looked at, as in the case of Mrs Cheveley, Sir Robert Chiltern should be painted, which denotes power and status. Moving on to the introduction of Lord Goring, which is rather short, we almost immediately encounter a comment on his intellect, "he is clever" (Wilde 154). Furthermore, we learn that "He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage" (Wilde 155) which already in getting to know his character gives him an image of superiority.

Returning to art references, it is quite interesting to contrast the references used in the female versus male character descriptions. Lady Chiltern is described as a "woman of grave Greek beauty" (Wilde 146), Mabel Chiltern as a "Tanagra statuette" (Wilde 148) and Lady Cheveley as "a work of art" (Wilde 149). This can be compared to Sir Robert Chiltern, whose description states that "Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head" (Wilde 151) and the description of Lord Caversham (even though he is not a main character) that says of him "Rather like a portrait by Lawrence" (Wilde 147), it becomes quite clear that the references in the introductions of the female characters refer to what could be considered rather sensual, fragile art while those of the male characters are portraits, which one could argue has connotations much more of power and seriousness than of sensuality and fragility.

What comes to mind when examining the female characters in *An Ideal Husband*, as well as the other three plays, is how the women are presented to us as quite stereotypical. Felski writes that "Woman is always a metaphor, dense with sedimented meanings" (Felski 38), what stereotypes and metaphorical meaning can we find in the two major characters of Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley?

Mrs Cheveley’s character is that of a fallen, dangerous woman. What makes her a threat to male authority is the fact that she transgresses the role she is expected to take as a
woman in Victorian society, which was being the perfect "Angel in the house" (Nead). Already in her description, it is made clear that she does not conform to the customary role of Victorian women, as she shows "the influence of too many schools" (Wilde 149) as opposed to the traditional good woman. Her ambition and her talent for partaking in the same scheming power games traditionally found in the closed male sphere challenge and pose a threat to the traditionally divided social spheres of male and female, the public and the private. In order to gain access and reputation in the typically male sphere of politics, she has to be immoral, using blackmail as her way in, while the men can rely on their intelligence. Because of her meanness, she is granted no pardon or salvation, which finally forces her into exile. It is interesting to compare her case with that of Mr Chiltern, who in his past has committed wrongdoings by breaking the law but is forgiven because he, as Eltis points out in *Revising Wilde* "has a heart" (Eltis 141) while Mrs Cheveley is punished merely for her persona being perceived as that of pure evil and greed with no possible salvation from anyone.

Furthermore, the appearance of Mrs Cheveley too conforms to the stereotype of the fallen woman. She is described as having much make up on, with highly coloured red lips that match her "Venetian red hair" (Wilde 149) and rouge, something which at the time would be considered decadent and associated with immorality and the world of prostitution and acting.

Mrs Chiltern too challenges male authority. She transgresses the contemporary gender boundaries by attempting to control the actions of her husband, who is part of the public (political) male sphere, and through being politically active herself albeit be it in the Women’s Liberal Association. Despite her posing a threat to male authority in one way, she falls back into the traditional role of women in another. As an example, In the final Act, she shows no sign of disapproval at Lord Goring's highly conservative and derogatory speech:
"A man’s life is of more value than a woman’s. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman’s life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses . . . A woman who can keep a man’s love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them." (Wilde 241)

Seeing as Mrs Chiltern is politically active in the Women’s Liberal Association as well as an advocate of higher education for women it is quite surprising that she does not confront Goring about his view of women as inferior. Possibly even more surprising is the fact that she repeats part of his speech to her husband, implying that she has been enlightened by Goring's words and will thus withdraw her demand that her husband leaves politics because of his corrupt past. She expresses her insight, "You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now" (Wilde 242). This passage of the text encourages readers to interpret Mrs Chiltern as having "learned her lesson" on how to properly act as a good woman. Initially she, according to Victorian customs that is, took too much control over her husband by demanding his retirement from public life. Lord Goring’s speech stresses that if she was to go through with her demand she would not only end her husband’s career, she would also "kill his love” for her and basically his whole existence (Wilde 241). Taking Goring's words into consideration it is probable that Lady Chiltern starts to question the consequences of her demand as her own life is entirely attached to that of her husband. What sort of life would she have to live if she no longer had a husband who loved her? Would she have to get a divorce, leading her to be seen as a "fallen woman” and possibly become an outcast in the very society that had once admired the perfect life and marriage of the Chilterns? It could be suggested that thoughts like this drove Mrs Chiltern to accept the conventional role of a good Victorian woman, "realising” that she should stand by her husband and forgive his wrongdoings, as her life is secondary to that of her husband. The robot-like way in which she repeats Goring’s words further encourages this theory. The text seems to display to us how Lady Chiltern (and many other women of Victorian society)
were indoctrinated into accepting and adopting patriarchal ideas of what women should be like. In this way the text is ambiguous, as on the surface it seems to support Goring’s patriarchal words, though reading between the lines we find social criticism brilliantly camouflaged by Wilde drawing attention to how hard it was for women to break contemporary gender boundaries, as well as how female independence could be feared as it meant losing all security in one’s life.

Felski discusses how the vision of women and femininity is contaminated by ”male-defined notions of the truth of femininity” (Felski 38). This statement is interesting considering the theme found in the play of woman as a being controlled by emotion. The women are presented to us as all sharing one underlying fault, emotion. In contrast to men such as Mr Chiltern, who seems to possess ”an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power” (Wilde 151), the life of a woman (as Goring expresses it) ”revolves in curves of emotion” (Wilde 241). It is interesting to note though that the play seems to criticise this definition of women as both Mrs Cheveley and Mrs Chiltern transgress this definition, seeing that they both rely on their intelligence in their own different ways. In order to blackmail Mr Chiltern, Mrs Cheveley needs to put emotion aside and use her intellect for her schemes to work. Similarly, Mrs Chiltern uses her intellect when advising her husband regarding politics, as well as in her own political engagements. Taking then into account Goring's words that ”It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses” (Wilde 241) it becomes evident that both Mrs Cheveley and Mrs Chiltern undermine the patriarchal notion of femininity as being driven solely by emotion. This critique becomes further evident in that Mrs Cheveley turns the ”irrationality” of women into a power, saying that ”The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us.” (Wilde 153). Of course, this statement could be read as rather derogative, however taking into
consideration the sharp woman that she is it could be argued that she, in fact, uses the contemporary view of women and undermines it, attempting instead to use it in her own favour.

Furthermore, Felski mentions that verbal and visual systems of meaning are pervaded with patriarchal power and that in such systems woman is "always connected to and inseparable from man" (Felski 38). In *An Ideal Husband*, women’s connection to men is constant, which reveals the underlying patriarchal power at play. Lady Chiltern’s image as the pure and loving wife relies on Mr Chiltern’s need for a moral "white image of all good things" (Wilde 244), a mascot, to stand by his side. For her, Mr Chiltern provides a glimpse into the male sphere of politics. By being his trustee and advisor, she is allowed to enter male territory, even if it is only in the private sphere of the home. Furthermore, it is much likely that Mrs Chiltern gains power in her own political aspirations by being the wife of a prominent politician. For example, in Act II coming home from a meeting with the Women’s Liberal Association, she tells her husband that his name was “was received with loud applause” (Wilde 185). The text emphasises that Robert Chiltern is highly respected and admired, something which assuredly profits Mrs Chiltern. Likewise, Mrs Cheveley is inseparable from man considering that the only way for her to gain reputation or any sort of power is through blackmailing a man, using the information she has of his past deeds. Moreover, even though she is not a traditional Victorian woman and portrayed as more independent than Mrs Chiltern or Mabel Chiltern, she still has to seek financial security in men. It is quite probable that her past engagement to Lord Goring was mainly for financial reasons. In Act III, Mrs Cheveley is having a conversation with Lord Goring about the past. Mrs Cheveley says "And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the conservatory at Tenby" (Wilde 218) to which Lord Goring replies "I am under the impression that my
lawyer settled that matter with you on certain terms… dictated by yourself.” (Wilde 218), Mrs Cheveley’s answer being ”At that time I was poor; you were rich” (Wilde 218). Furthermore, one of the reasons that Mrs Cheveley earns the fortune she does is because of her former friend and possibly also a lover, Baron Arnheim, left her his fortune after his death, thus it becomes clear that Mrs Cheveley’s position relies on the men in her life.

Finally, as Bose mentions on page in Women as Figures of Disorder in the Plays of Oscar Wilde both Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley, moral opposites and very different kinds of women, are put in their place by men (135). It is Lord Goring who in the end of the third act reveals Mrs Cheveley to have stolen a diamond brooch. Equally, it is Lord Goring who talks Mrs Chiltern into standing by her husband again, taking back her demand of his retreating from politics and public life. An Ideal Husband is undoubtedly an ambiguous play, it both undermines and supports patriarchal agenda. Eltis comments on this ambiguity in Revising Wilde, where she discusses how An Ideal Husband does not contain a distinctive thesis and antithesis, in contrast to Lady Windermere’s Fan and A Woman of No Importance, both of which she finds are centred more on a distinct theme,

Rather, [An Ideal Husband] . . . is constructed in layer upon layer of assertion and contradiction. Characters alternately depend upon and subvert traditional stereotypes. Apparently unironic statements are rendered ambiguous by the action which accompanies them. While presenting a reassuringly familiar melodrama of intrigue and blackmail, Wilde placed his action in the centre of nineteenth-century political life, and examined the issues of private and public morality and their relation to the contemporary debate on the role of women in society. (Eltis 133)

I agree with Eltis’ words on An Ideal Husband. It is a play of stereotypes and distinct divisions between male and female authority, as well as private and public spheres. Characters such as Mrs Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley transgress the contemporary gender boundaries, though in the end they more conform than reject the roles they have been given
because of their gender. Still, it should be noted that the women, maybe not so much Mabel Chiltern, are still women of strong minds and of intellect. They may be trapped in the clasp of patriarchy but they are well aware of their situations and rely much on their intelligence, which is how they get away with denying their own stereotypes.
3. Conclusion

In these three plays Wilde used his wit and genius to camouflage his commentary and critique of Victorian society. *Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* all deal with the contemporary conflict between female and male, private and public spheres in which women are kept in the former, in the tight clasp of patriarchal society and gender boundaries. Though the plays have in common conventional plots and stereotypes, Wilde subverts and undermines his characters, presenting to the reader women attempting to transgress their gender boundaries, succeeding somewhat, yet ultimately conforming to conventionality. It becomes apparent, that the Victorian vision of how women should be was permeated by patriarchal notions of femininity, offering women only the narrow role of wife and mother, any attempt at breaking the norm being seen as a threat to male authority and the harmonious domestic life in which women were to find their place. Furthermore, the texts illuminates the degree to which Victorian women were ultimately inseparable and connected to men. Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband* and Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* are both dominant, intelligent women who attempt to transgress contemporary gender boundaries, yet both of them are financially dependent on men in their lives. This is a pattern found in all three of the plays: female characters trying to break out of their stereotypes, their attempts finally being disrupted by the force of Victorian patriarchal society. The texts are ambiguous in their double messages, though examining how Wilde placed his criticisms in between the lines, it becomes clear that even the fact that the women do not wholly succeed in rejecting the boundaries of their gender and stereotype, can be interpreted as Wilde displaying how hard it was for Victorian women to break norms and go against society in fear of the consequences.
4. Works cited

**Primary source**


**Secondary sources**


