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Elements of Traditional Victorian Gender Role Subversion in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*

Introduction

Gender roles have been present for many centuries and remained largely unquestioned for a long time. While gender inequality was still strong in the Victorian era (1820-1914), this period can be seen as a starting point for initial feminist attitudes. This can be demonstrated, for example, by examining Victorian literary works by both female and male authors. This paper will argue that Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, published in 1893 (cf. Wilde 1996, p. ii), is an exemplary early-feminist play as it contains various elements that sophisticatedly criticise the discrimination against women in the Victorian age. The first part of the article presents a brief overview of the role of women in British Victorian society and literature. The second part will then focus on the play itself, which will be analysed and interpreted in relation to the role of men and women in society. Both the various discussions between side characters and the central conflict between the two main characters, Mrs Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth, shall be examined with regard to elements that have an empowering character for women and challenge the traditional norms of Victorian society.

The Role of Women in Society in Victorian England (1820-1914)

In the Victorian age, gender inequality was a prominent issue present in all domains of life. Women were excluded from politics both as representatives in parliament and voters (cf. UK Parliament n.d.). Moreover, married women lacked several legal rights, such as the right to own

property, and they were expected to be completely submissive to their husbands (cf. Griffin 2012, p. 46; p. 63). Women also suffered from the sexual double standard, which denotes "a code of morals that applies more severe standards of sexual behavior to women than to men" (Merriam-Webster 2024). Among other things, women were expected to remain virgins until marriage, whereas men were not (cf. Kathy 2021, p. 42). As a result, it was women who became outcasts in the case of illegitimate children while men did not suffer from any consequences (cf. Frost 2003, pp. 293-295). Both unmarried mothers and their children were facing discrimination and stigmatisation in legal, social and emotional terms (cf. *ibid.*). As written by Ginger Frost, "[a]n illegitimate child was literally parentless at law, and even the subsequent marriage of the parents could not legitimize their offspring" (p. 293). There was hardly any support for unmarried mothers as there were no legal obligations on the part of the father and only minor support by helping organisations (cf. Higginbotham 1989, p. 321; Frost 2003, pp. 297-299). Suffering from poverty and social exclusion, some women could not endure their situation and were as desperate as to commit infanticide (cf. Higginbotham 1989, p. 322). The political laws as well as the social etiquette of the double standard, therefore, drastically impacted women's lives.

The Role of Women in Literature in Victorian England

Similarly to their role in society, women were barely acknowledged in literature at the beginning of the Victorian era. Until then, female authors had

usually been disregarded by their male peers and prejudiced for only focusing on sentimental and romantic themes, instead of writing serious works (cf. Carter & McRae 2017, p. 261). Over the course of the Victorian age, this view shifted slowly as women, such as the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Elliot (née Mary Ann Evans) started addressing a wider range of topics (cf. *ibid.*, p. 263). However, as Mary Ann Evans felt the need to publish under a male pseudonym, it becomes apparent that female authors were still ranked lower than their male counterparts.

In the Victorian era, literature was also influenced by Lord Chamberlain's Theatres Licensing Act. This instrument of censoring plays was in force from 1737 to 1968 (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 303-304). Some plays were changed or fully prohibited from being enacted, mostly because they were perceived as a danger to the current political and social system (cf. *ibid.*). Nevertheless, themes revolving around morality gained popularity in the genre from the 1860s onwards (*ibid.*). This shall be exemplified in the following by taking a closer look at Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*.

The Victorian Playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

One famous British author dealing with social issues of his time was Oscar Wilde. Feminism was part of his life in several respects as his mother was a dedicated feminist and he himself was the editor of a feminist journal called *Woman's World* for two years (cf. Caine 2013, pp. 289-290). In many of his own works, he advocates against patriarchal structures and postulates gender equality by painting the picture of a more independent woman in society (cf. Kohl & Seeber 2004, p. 317). One of his writing strategies is combining comical elements with serious social issues, which means that his messages are often masked and implicitly conveyed (cf. Carter & McRae 2017, p. 304). Reading his plays in the light of the Theatres Licensing Act suggests that his methods served both an aesthetic and a practical purpose. Despite his literary success, his career

ended rather tragically, as he got imprisoned when his homosexuality became public (cf. Kohl & Seeber 2004, p. 322). It can only be speculated if the suppression of his sexuality that he experienced was among his motivations to advocate for another oppressed social group, i.e., women.

***A Woman of No Importance* by Oscar Wilde**

While *A Woman of No Importance* is sometimes viewed as the least important of Wilde's plays (cf. Kathy 2021, p. 40), it can still be argued to contain crucial feminist elements in response to the society of the late 19th century. The play addresses themes such as the suppression of women, the social consequences of illegitimacy and, therefore, implicitly the sexual double standard. As both Wilde's indirect approach of exerting criticism and the absence of a clear resolution were unconventional at the time, they may explain why the play initially lacked recognition (cf. Nassaar 2015, p. 38; Eltis 2013, p. 325). While some scholars may still assert that the criticism is hidden too strongly, many critics ultimately acknowledge the satirical character of the play (cf. *ibid.*).

The story has several plotlines and is set in the present time of the Victorian age, starting at a dinner party and evolving within twenty-four hours (cf. Wilde 1996). Throughout the play, the topic of men and women's social roles is addressed in various ways by different characters, either in discussions or through their behaviour. Thus, the first part of the analysis shall focus on the side characters and their conversations. Among them is Ms Allonby, who impersonates a typical, traditional Victorian woman, as opposed to Lady Caroline, who subverts those conservative expectations. Mr Kelvil serves as a male character who supports progressive thinking, and Hester Worsely exemplifies the modern American woman, offering yet another perspective. It will be illustrated that through the interactions between these characters, social critique on gender inequality in Victorian society is exerted.

The focus of the play, however, lies on the two main characters Mrs Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth, who have a common past. Their story is revealed step by step both to the reader and to another important character named Gerald. The latter is, in fact, the son of Mrs Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth; however, Gerald only learns about his father's identity during the play. The main conflict between the characters revolves around the fact that Illingworth refused to marry Mrs Arbuthnot in the past despite her pregnancy. As a result, she became a social outcast and had to bring up Gerald as her illegitimate child on her own. The second part of the analysis will, thus, focus on the relationship between Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot. It shall be argued that Mrs Arbuthnot manages to overcome patriarchal power structures in Victorian society embodied in the figure of Illingworth and to evolve as a strong female character over the course of the play.

Gender Roles Among the Side Characters in *A Woman of No Importance*

One side character who subverts stereotypical female behaviour is Lady Caroline. There are several instances in the play in which she expresses her superiority to men, e.g., by telling her husband Sir John Pontefract what he should be doing. Already at the beginning of the play, she asserts that he should wear the scarf she has knitted for him, and even after he responds that he is warm enough without it, she disagrees and judges him (cf. Wilde 1996, p. 1). Later, she asks him to confirm that he has put on his shoes in the garden and tells him where to sit (cf. *ibid.*, p. 7). She is, in general, portrayed as a very confident woman. This can be seen in statements such as "I believe I am usually right" (*ibid.*, p. 11), which she directs at Mr Kelvil, another guest of the dinner party. What is more, Lady Caroline repeatedly misspells Mr Kelvil's name (cf. *ibid.*, p. 14) and, thereby, takes power away from him to some extent. The fact that she ignores the corrections made by her husband again supports the impression that she places herself above both Mr Kelvil and Sir John.

With Mr Kelvil, the author introduces a male character that clearly favours gender equality and thinks highly of women. One example is a scene in which Mr Kelvil discusses the female gender by praising women's intelligence. He describes woman as "the intellectual helpmate of man in public and private life" (*ibid.*, pp. 13-14) and argues that men would "forget the true ideals" (*ibid.*) if they were not reminded of them by women. He thereby stresses the importance of women to pay attention to moral issues and to help in preserving moral standards. Asserting that "[t]he growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life" (*ibid.*, p. 8), he explicitly favours participation of women in public life and assigns them an important role in maintaining a functioning society.

Additionally, the differences in thought between nationalities regarding gender issues become apparent in discussions between the British party guests and the American girl Hester Worsley. When Hester highly praises Gerald, she is told that it is not common in England "for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married" (*ibid.*, pp. 2-3). This is another example of the everyday oppression of women in British Victorian society. Moreover, a discussion about the "Ideal Man" reveals more differences in the worldview of a traditional British woman, represented by Ms Allonby, compared to that of an American woman like Hester. Ms Allonby is of the opinion that men should treat women both as goddesses and children (cf. *ibid.*, p. 30), the latter part suggesting that men should deny women the right to make their own choices. The assertion that women should not be allowed "to have missions" (*ibid.*) insinuates that they should not be able to engage in serious matters. Even though Ms Allonby wishes for respectful treatment of women in private, she believes that a good man "should persistently compromise [them] when [they] are in public" (*ibid.*, p. 31). Hester, the American girl, expresses her shocked reaction to these conservative views, portraying the United States as a more progressive society regarding such matters (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 33-34). However, in consideration

of the fact that some of the other women tell Hester not to believe everything that was said (cf. *ibid.*, p. 33), Ms Allonby's statements may also be interpreted in a sarcastic manner. Her description of the "Ideal Man" can, thus, be seen both as an illustration of the viewpoint women were forced to adopt at the time and as a criticism of precisely this approach towards gender roles.

With the character of Gerald Arbuthnot, Mrs Arbuthnot's son, Wilde presents the reader with an example of a naïve male person who is rather unaware of the issue of gender inequality, but at the same time someone whose eyes can be opened by appealing to reason. Gerald seems to see women as complex beings as he argues that they are difficult to understand but clever at the same time (cf. *ibid.*, p. 56). However, instances such as his repeated attempt to convince Lord Illingworth and his mother that a marriage between the two would solve all their problems (cf. *ibid.*, p. 80) show that he does not seem to fully understand the social context. He is unaware that this marriage would not legalise him as a child and would, thus, not improve his mother's situation at all. It is only in the end that he acknowledges his mother's refusal (cf. *ibid.*, p. 86). Gerald's final realisation of the injustice done to his mother and his resulting change in opinion could be seen as symbolic for the possibility to create awareness among a larger proportion of the population. Thereby, a shift in the worldview may occur, which could then trigger progress in the fight against inequality.

Derogatory Attitude Towards Women of the Male Main Character

The stereotypical, traditional Victorian male perspective is displayed through the character Lord Illingworth, who demonstrates a disrespectful and condescending attitude towards the female gender. Already in the beginning, it becomes apparent that Lord Illingworth feels superior to women. In a conversation between some of the women at the dinner party, they discuss ridiculous reasons for which he might reject a woman, naming a dislike of her feet or a large family as

examples (cf. *ibid.*, p. 4). Another telling example of Illingworth's assumed superiority and his mockery of women can be found in the passage in which he argues that women should worship men because they "kneel so gracefully; men don't" (*ibid.*, p. 16). These examples illustrate the disrespectful way in which many women were thought of at the time.

Furthermore, Lord Illingworth's comments show that women were affronted in diverse ways. When he calls Gerald's mother a "good woman", he insults her within the same remark by stating that "good women have such limited views of life, their horizon is so small, their interests are so petty, aren't they?" (*ibid.*, p. 54), implying that he thinks women are not smart. More explicitly, he openly contradicts Gerald's assumption of women being clever (cf. *ibid.*, p. 56). There is another instance in which he accuses women of weakness, adding an additional layer of insult by calling them tyrants: "The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts" (*ibid.*, p. 56). This is a paradox in itself as tyranny is usually associated with powerful political leaders, which adds a satirical touch to the statement. In this instance, the power aspect is taken away from the tyrant and the negative connotation becomes even stronger, as only the image of cruelty remains. What is more, Illingworth asserts that, in his opinion, this form of tyranny has been and will be ongoing. This adds another dimension of negativity and insult since women are portrayed as an endless nuisance to the world.

Illingworth's openly and strongly misogynist attitude further manifests itself in his dehumanisation of women. Firstly, this is an observation made by Mr Kelvil, who states that he believes "Lord Illingworth regards woman simply as a toy" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Secondly, this assumption is explicitly spoken out by Lord Illingworth when he addresses Mrs Arbuthnot in the following way: "[Y]ou gave yourself to me like a flower, to do anything I liked with. [...] [Y]ou were the prettiest of playthings" (*ibid.*, p. 98). This ties back to the concept of the sexual double standard mentioned above. Denoting women as toys takes away all

their dignity and illustrates how men felt the right to satisfy their sexual desires, whereas women's purpose was found in obeying men completely without the right to raise their own voices in the matter.

**Stepwise Subversion
of Patriarchal Structures
Through the Female Main Character**

Overt criticism of the social system with its inequal gender roles is uttered by the female main character Mrs Arbuthnot, using her life story as an example. She openly confronts Illingworth with his wrongdoing and asserts that he ruined her life by leaving her an unmarried woman with a fatherless child (cf. *ibid.*). She bluntly admits that she was suffering and felt ashamed (cf. *ibid.*, p. 46). The situation from her point of view is presented as follows: "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" (*ibid.*, p. 80). It shows that she feels betrayed and disadvantaged, and she generalises her statement in the end by talking of a man and a woman instead of herself and Illingworth. Interestingly, she similarly switches into third-person perspective when she reveals her story to her son (cf. *ibid.*, p. 70). This can both be seen as a way to distance herself from the past but also as a means of illustrating that her experience is not a unique story but was relived in a similar manner by a myriad other women at the time. Mrs Arbuthnot gives herself and all other suppressed women a voice, and she pleads for gender equality by stating that not only women should be punished for any misconduct, but the same measures should be taken on men (cf. *ibid.*, p. 66). Therefore, she stops the silencing of women and advocates equal rights for all genders.

Another aspect which illustrates that Mrs Arbuthnot has overcome her past is her utterly positive attitude towards her son Gerald despite his illegitimacy. During the discussion with Illingworth and Gerald, Mrs Arbuthnot elaborates

in a detailed and emotional manner on what it has meant to her to be a mother. She makes it clear that she has always dearly loved her son despite the circumstances (cf. *ibid.*, p. 83). She has supported Gerald during his whole life. As a result, he has adopted a rather prestigious position as a bank clerk, overcoming the stereotype of illegitimacy as an obstacle to finding a good job (cf. Kathy 2021, p. 43). Mrs Arbuthnot's affection towards her son also becomes clear when she desperately asserts how afraid she is of losing him should he take the professional position offered by Illingworth. Her statement in this act is very metaphorical as she compares her son to the "little vineyard of her life", a "walled-in garden the well of water" and even "the ewe-lamb God sent [her]" (Wilde 1996, p. 48). The choice in language illustrates how emotional the topic is for her. Arbuthnot's close relationship to her son contradicts the stereotypes of women with illegitimate children feeling forced to take cruel actions such as infanticide out of desperation and absolute hopelessness.

The play shows a transformation of the female main character Mrs Arbuthnot as she manages to overcome her male oppressor. Already by confronting Illingworth openly with her opinion, by telling him her story from her own perspective and by making explicit accusations against him, she gains power by finding her own voice. Further, she refuses to marry Illingworth after what he has done to her (cf. Kathy 2021, p. 43); rather, she actively chooses to continue her lifestyle. This time, it is not his choice over her, but suddenly she is in power and decides over their marriage. She does not allow him to suppress her anymore and even speaks up when she feels that he is exerting power over another woman, namely the American girl Hester. When Illingworth complains that Hester made a scene the other evening simply because he wanted to give her a "silly kiss" (Wilde 1996, p. 88), Mrs Arbuthnot tells him clearly that a kiss can ruin a life (cf. *ibid.*). Mrs Arbuthnot's growing confidence supports the claim that she has finally found her way back into society, subverting the patriarchal structures that had formerly constrained her. As opposed to what she claims at one point in the book about getting a

usual story with a usual ending (cf. *ibid.*, p. 80), the ending of her story does not follow this stereotypical pattern anymore.

The Play's Development Towards a More Feminist Outlook

While it can be argued that the ending of Wilde's play may be open to interpretation, there is certainly a close tie between the title and the last sentence of this literary work. The title *A Woman of No Importance*, which already hints towards issues of gender roles, is pronounced literally in the play by Lord Illingworth. During a conversation with a woman at the dinner party, he spots an envelope and remarks that the handwriting looks familiar to him (cf. Wilde 1996, pp. 20-21). However, when asked who he is referring to, he answers: "Oh! no one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance" (*ibid.*). As the reader learns later, this remark is even more condescending and ridiculous as it may appear at that moment since this letter is written by Mrs Arbuthnot, who, as the mother of his child, should play rather an important role in his life. While this is an example of the dominant male in Victorian society, the ending of the play reverses the issue completely. The woman once described as being of no importance is given the last word and thereby the opportunity to do herself justice. In the last scene, Gerald finds a glove that the reader knows belongs to Illingworth (cf. *ibid.*, p. 94). He asks his mother whose it could be, and she, who knows its owner very well, only responds that the glove belongs to "[a] man of no importance" (*ibid.*). This is probably the most essential line of the play as, finally, Mrs Arbuthnot seems to have fully overcome her trauma and freed herself from the past by referring to Illingworth as a person irrelevant to her.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, it has become apparent that Oscar Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance* addresses the controversy around the

roles of men and women in the Victorian age in diverse ways. By including both male and female characters that either adhere to or contradict stereotypical Victorian gender expectations in their discussions and through their behaviour, he illustrates a moment of change in society. Despite Lord Illingworth being a powerful traditional Victorian man, the characters surrounding him do not give in but rather challenge his opinions and behaviour. Most importantly, Mrs Arbuthnot establishes herself as a strong female character over the course of the play. In the end, she manages to overcome her role of an oppressed woman and develops into a strong, self-assured character who is proud of her illegitimate son and decided to continue her self-determined life independent of any men.

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