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GENDER ROLE REVERSAL, FEMALE SOLIDARITY, AND FALLEN WOMEN IN OSCAR WILDE'S PLAYS

Abstract. Wilde's plays *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Salomé* all feature female characters and themes relevant to the domains of research of feminist literary theory, including relationships between men and women, marriage, the complexity of female characters, their treatment in literature, gender roles and how they are portrayed. This paper explores the themes of role reversal, female solidarity and fallen women with the aim of showing that Wilde's works were progressive for their time in terms of pointing out problematic societal expectations and norms.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde satirized the gender roles of the Victorian society and how men had power over women and their choices, while in the plays *A Woman of No Importance*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Salomé*, the main characters are fallen women, a stereotype the Victorian society invented to mark women they considered impure. *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* are plays about the struggles of fallen women who made mistakes in the past and formed important friendships with other female characters, while the tragedy *Salomé* tells the tale of a woman who falls and dies as a consequence of her fall. Additionally, the paper will examine closely related themes, such as motherhood, sexuality, and negative gender stereotypes related to the one of the fallen women.

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Wilde's works have been studied for decades by scholars versed in various disciplines. Earlier, feminist literary critics have been focused mostly on female writers and male novelists whose works contain the topics of patriarchy and negative female stereotypes. Considering the subject matters of Wilde's plays, Wilde can be considered as very progressive and well-ahead of his time, which are the reasons why his works have been eagerly explored by feminist critics. Wilde's society plays *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Woman of No Importance, Lady Windermere's Fan*, and his tragedy *Salomé* address the issues of gender role reversal, female solidarity and fallen women. To substantiate this claim, the paper will explore these and other related themes, such as female sexuality, the topic of motherhood, and the negative stereotype of the angel in the house, by relying on the opinions of renowned feminist writers and critics, including Jane Marcus, Eleanor Fitzsimons, Helen Davies, Petra Dierkes-Thrun, Barbara Caine, and others. They have explored the feminist themes within Wilde's works, his female characters, their complexity and relationships with other characters in the plays, as well as the aforementioned themes this paper will deal with.

Today's literary feminist criticism deals with the same issues and more — the critics continue to explore works written by both men and women, how women are portrayed in their works, the different male and female relationships, the topics of patriarchy, sexism, sisterhood, motherhood, gender roles and gender stereotypes.

The Importance of Being Earnest is perhaps the most popular and most widely read of Wilde's plays. This society play revolves around marriage and satirizes Victorian conventions and the behaviour of both Victorian men and women. In the play, two women, Cecily and Gwendolen, are obsessed with the name Earnest, so the men who want to marry them, named Jack and Algernon, lie about their real names. Wilde portrays two genders similarly and the men and women are presented equally shallow—the women because they would only marry someone who bears a specific name, and the men who lie about their identities in order to marry these beautiful women.

Gwendolen is not a typical Victorian young woman and can be considered a variation of the New Woman. She is direct and unafraid of speaking her mind in front of men, as evident from the way she speaks to Jack after her mother is gone. She encourages him to speak his mind, she talks about her own feelings openly and with no shame and even says that she wishes he showed his love towards her more openly in public (Wilde, 2004, p. 62). When Jack accidentally brings up marriage, Gwendolen is the one who takes initiative and tells him to propose to her and even criticizes him for taking so long to do it. In the essay "Parody, Paradox and Play in *The Importance of Being Earnest*", Burkhard Niederhoff (2011) points out: "Not only is Gwendolen in charge of the conversation, she even assumes that ultimate privilege of the male sex, the praise of the beloved's eyes" (p. 105). Gwendolen is similar to Cecily, who is also not afraid of voicing her opinions and is also obsessed with the name Earnest. Cecily is also creative, educated, well-read and prone to writing, and can also be considered a New Woman. She keeps a diary that she plans to eventually publish, and does not hesitate to deny Algernon access to it.

What is particularly important about the play is how both Gwendolen and Cecily assume the role of the man during their proposals. Wilde reversed the roles in the relationships by making his women characters do what would be considered masculine actions and display traits recognized as male. They take the lead, instructing Jack and Algernon how to propose to them. Additionally, Gwendolen and Cecily's relationship is intriguing because it undergoes several stages. At the beginning, they are jealous of each other because they consider the other a threat to their love life. During their first meeting, Cecily is quite rude to Gwendolen, pouring sugar into her tea even after Gwendolen said she did not want any, and cutting her a slice of cake after Gwendolen specifically asked for bread and butter. With smiles on their faces and, as Wilde puts it, "elaborate politeness" (Wilde, 2004, p. 114) they accuse each other of being immoral and promise to protect their Earnests:

> *Cecily. ...* To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.
>
> *Gwendolen.* From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right. (Wilde, 2004, p. 114)

The reason for this conflict might have been Wilde's desire to satirize how easily even the most educated of women turned against one another when jealous. But he did not only illustrate unnecessary hostility between female characters: once it is revealed that they have been lied to, Gwendolen and Cecily unite and form a type of sisterhood, offended by the treatment they have received from the men they love. In an essay about friendship and conflict between Wilde's women, Helen Davies (2015) writes about their relationship and the significance of female solidarity, which, according to her, "becomes a way of women to unite against the injustices perpetrated against them by men; it is an expression of shared experience and solidarity" (p. 170).

Wilde reversed the gender roles once again with Lady Bracknell's character. She takes marriage quite seriously, which can be seen in the way she interrogates Jack before approving of his and Gwendolen's marriage. Since her husband is ill, she takes it upon herself to do what was usually a man's task in the Victorian era — the questioning of the future son-in-law. It is worth noting that she gets a voice, while her husband does not. Michael Y. Bennet (2015) jokingly says that she is the one who "wears the pants in the house" (p. 5). It is not Lord Bracknell who commands his daughter and controls her, instead, it is his wife.

A Woman of No Importance is another play about the shallowness of the upper-class, Victorian norms and standards and morality. It may not be as witty and humorous as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but it is just as compelling, with a fallen woman as the protagonist. In the essay "Feminism", where she examined the feminist themes within two of Wilde's society plays, Barbara Caine (2013, p. 291) stated that *A Woman of No Importance* is a play about the question of social purity and the sexual double standard and it has a surprising plot because the Puritan views in it win out over the libertarian ones: the character of the fallen woman triumphs over the man who seduced her, refused to marry her and left her to raise their son by herself.

Wilde himself called *A Woman of No Importance* "a woman's play", which it indeed is (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 276). The female characters in the play dominate, with their presence and influence, the lives of the men around them. The two most important female characters are Miss Hester Worsley and Mrs. Arbuthnot, who do not belong to the upper-class Victorian society. Unlike Lady Caroline, Mrs. Allonby and Lady Hunstanton, who spend their time gossiping and manipulating, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester have no interest in doing anything questionable and speaking ill of people for their own amusement.

Hester is a young American Puritan girl, which immediately sets her apart from all the other women in the play, who are English. She is righteous and "a defender of women" (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 136), however, she is not perfect. Although her views and behaviour appear more acceptable to the reader than the views of the Victorian women, in the beginning, she proudly supports the idea that children should pay for the sins of their parents. However, when Mrs. Arbuthnot's secret is revealed, Hester changes her mind, realizing how wrong she was, a change that shows that she is not a one-dimensional character. She can be considered a feminist for she demands the same justice for both men and women. She says, "You are unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust" (Wilde, 2007, p. 29). While she is interested in Gerald because he is hardworking and intelligent, the upper-class women have different standards when it comes to the man of their dreams, as is evident from the conversation where Lady Stutfield, Mrs. Allonby and Lady Hunstanton are discussing the Ideal Man:

> *Lady Caroline.* The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious requests, and gratify every one of our whims. He should encourage us to have caprices, and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says. (Wilde, 2007, p. 25)

In *Understanding the Victorians*, Susie L. Steinbach (2012, p.166) explains the difference between the positions of men and women in the Victorian era and how sex determined the role of a person. While men were part of the public sphere, participated in the worlds of business and politics, and were independent, women stayed at home, ran the households, raised the children, and were dependent. The difference between men and women does not stop there. There was a double standard regarding sexuality, and, while too much sex was considered unhealthy and immoral for both genders, there was a difference in moral standards prescribed for men and women. Were women to display sexuality and desire, they would be branded as "fallen" and be shunned from society. When it came to men, it was common for them, especially those of the upper-class, to have affairs, and there was no such term as a "fallen man".

Regarding the ideal spouse, the view that the upper-class women in the play have on the Ideal Man can be compared to the Victorian society's view on the ideal woman or the Angel in the House, who belonged to her husband, followed all the rules that society dictated and entered marriage pure. Just like the Ideal Man, this stereotype was contradictory — the woman only belonged in the domestic sphere and was to raise children, but it was expected of her to know how to manage the home budget. Additionally, this stereotype implied that women did not know anything about sexual intercourse, but were also expected to be ready when their husbands desired them. In a different conversation, Wilde mocked how the Victorian society viewed women as their husbands' property by reversing the situation in the play. Mrs. Allonby says,

> "I don't think that we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married women's property. That is the only true definition of what married women's property really is. But we don't belong to any one." (Wilde, 2007, pp. 22–23)

Mrs. Arbuthnot is an unconventional female character, different from all the other characters in this play and in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She is the embodiment of the Victorian fallen woman: she was in a relationship with a man before marriage, so she believes that she is impure and lives a life full of regrets and anger, because the man she loved, Lord Illingworth, refused to marry her after they found out she was pregnant. The significance of Wilde making her character a fallen woman lies in the way the Victorian society shunned and treated fallen women. They were women who were once respected, but then they either turned to prostitution or had relations with men before marriage, actions which society did not condone. Steinbach (2012) writes that the Victorians used to divide women into "virtuous and vicious, innocent and fallen, wife and prostitute" (p. 244). Wilde deciding to make the main character of his play a fallen woman shows that he was ahead of his time, and by choosing not to condone her for sleeping with a man before marriage, it is possible that Wilde wanted to criticize the attitude society had toward fallen women and sex.

Regarding the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot, Peter Raby (Powell & Raby, 2013) speaks of her as "both a woman with a past, an innocent victim, and the centre of goodness and moral truth within the play" (p. 151) in his essay about Wilde's society plays titled "Wilde's comedies of Society". Mrs. Arbuthnot is not a faultless Victorian woman — she admits that she made a mistake when she was younger and got involved with Lord Illingworth and she is also very possessive and controlling of Gerald, her son. However, she is also a good mother and has raised her son to be good and hardworking. Mrs. Arbuthnot is not a perfect woman; instead, she is a real woman, with faults and convictions. When Lord Illingworth offers to finally marry her, she refuses, maintaining her dignity, similarly to how she refused the money Lord Illingworth's mother offered to pay her when she forbade her son from marrying her.

Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot have much in common: they are righteous, they love Gerald, and they are different from the upper-class women in the play. Hester is an outsider and Mrs. Arbuthnot is a fallen woman and part of the middle-class. Being different from the other women, they find a friend in one another. Hester supports and does not condemn Mrs. Arbuthnot for the sins of her youth, while Mrs. Arbuthnot approves of Hester's love for her son and does not think of her less for being American. In an essay where she compared Wilde's, Ibsen's and Shaw's takes on the New Woman, Petra Dierkes-Thrun (2015, p. 88) says that "Wilde was quite serious about the idea of female solidarity" and that Hester's and Mrs. Arbuthnot's support and mutual respect are an important part of the play, which stands as an opposite to the shallow relationship the upper-class women have.

Female relationships and solidarity are also important themes in the play *Lady Windermere's Fan*. In a letter to an unknown addressee, Wilde admitted:

> "The psychological idea that suggested to me the play is this. A woman who has had a child, but never known the passion of maternity (there are such women), suddenly sees the child she has abandoned falling over a precipice." (Kohl, 2011, p. 221).

At the centre of the play are two female characters: Lady Windermere, a happily married woman, and Mrs. Erlynne, a woman who is trying to get back into society after she was shunned years before when she left her husband and child for another man. It is revealed that Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, but Lady Windermere never gets to know the truth. Mrs. Erlynne saves her daughter's marriage and life by not allowing her to make the same mistake she did in the past and disappears from her life forever.

Both of these female characters are not who they appear to be. At the beginning, Lady Windermere appears to be a stereotypical angel in the house, but everything changes when she starts suspecting that her husband is cheating on her and is ready to leave both him and their child for another man. Mrs. Erlynne, on the other hand, is initially presented as a fallen woman and homewrecker, but at the end, she selflessly saves her daughter's marriage and prevents her from going through the shame that leaving your husband for another man brings.

Mrs. Erlynne is similar to Mrs. Allonby from *A Woman of No Importance* in the way she acts — she flirts and jokes with the men around her, and is not afraid of manipulating them. As a result of this, all women are jealous of her beauty and see her as a threat. She does not look her age, so she can fool everyone that she is in her twenties when she is actually in her forties. The Duchess of Berwick at one point says that she is "just a little too attractive" (Wilde, 2011, p. 21), while Dumby describes her as a sensible woman and says that a lot of wives objected to her coming to Lady Windermere's party (Wilde, 2011, p. 22).

When she finds out that her daughter has married a wealthy man, she decides to blackmail him for money in exchange for the truth not being revealed. While she blackmails Lord Windermere, she still cares about her daughter's wellbeing, enough to sacrifice her own reputation. The first time she displays genuine emotion is when she realizes that her daughter's marriage and life are in danger:

> "I feel a passion awakening within me that I never felt before. What can it mean? The daughter must not be like the mother—that would be terrible. How can I save her? How can I save my child?" (Wilde, 2011, p. 24).

Although she wants to help her, she has no interest in being a mother to her daughter and part of her life. She is aware that Lady Windermere thinks that her mother is dead and has constructed an ideal image of her in her mind, and she does not want to break that illusion and shatter her daughter's heart. She tells Lord Windermere that she wants her daughter to cherish the memory of a dead and stainless mother, because if Lady Windermere knew that Mrs. Erlynne was a fallen woman, she might start hating her and shun her like society did all those years ago, or maybe even think of herself as impure because of her mother's mistake.

Dierkes-Thrun (2015) points out that just like Mrs. Arbuthnot, another fallen woman, Mrs. Erlynne gets a happy ending: ". . . after she has cleverly saved her daughter, who is still unaware of their biological connection, Mrs. Erlynne goes off to a promising new life abroad with a doting rich husband, Lord Augustus, redeeming her both socially and morally" (p. 86).

Aside from making a fallen woman an important character in the play and redeeming her in the end, Wilde also included a, for the time, thought-provoking commentary on motherhood, something only New Woman writers dared write about in the Victorian era. By making Mrs. Erlynne a woman who has no desire in being a mother, Wilde showed that women like that existed, although society did not want to acknowledge it. Sos Eltis writes that "through Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde not only subverted all the conventions governing the behavior of the fallen woman, but dared to question the sacred status of motherhood as woman's greatest ambition" (Eltis, 1996, p. 72). By redeeming her and giving both her and Mrs. Arbuthnot happy endings, it is clear that Wilde did not approve of the attitude society had toward fallen women, which makes him very progressive and way ahead of his time.

The character of Salomé is similar to Mrs. Erlynne — both are fallen women who use their charms to achieve their goals. Originally written in French, Wilde's *Salomé* tells the biblical story of the eponymous princess, the daughter of Herod Antipas and Herodias, who requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter. According to Dierkes-Thrun (2015, p. 26), Wilde used Salomé to embody central fantasies and fears of Western cultural and philosophical modernity using erotic and aesthetic transgressions Similarly, Joseph Donohue (2013) states that, in the play, "Wilde depicts perverse, inordinate, illicit and impulsive desire and its clash with ultimate authority" (p. 126). Amanda Fernbach (2001, p. 196) calls *Salomé* a postmodern play, saying that gender and sexuality in it are not fixed, but instead doubled, multiplied and shifted. The play was considered scandalous in Victorian society for three reasons: female sexuality was still a taboo, the act of Salome kissing the severed head and biting Jokanaan's mouth alluded to cannibalism, and Jokanaan was a figure from the Bible and a saint.

Wilde's vision of Salome differs to the one described in the Bible. The Salome from the Bible requested John the Baptist's head because of her mother's caprice, but Wilde's Salome does not get manipulated. Instead, she wants Jokanaan's head for her own reasons, be it anger, lust, or both. When speaking to Carrillo one evening, Wilde said the following about his vision of Salomé:

> "For I cannot conceive of a Salomé who is unconscious of what she does, a Salomé who is but a silent and passive instrument .... Never ...

> ! Her lips in Leonardo's painting reveal the limitless cruelty of her soul. Her lust must be an abyss, her corruptness, as ocean.” (Carrillo, 1979, p. 193).

That is exactly how he wrote her character in the play. Unlike the Salome in the Bible who never gets to speak and is a tool of her mother, Wilde’s Salome is vocal, selfish, and most importantly, powerful. She is similar to some of the other female characters in Wilde’s plays. As mentioned, Salomé and Mrs. Erlynne share a lot of similarities: not only are they both fallen women, they are also beautiful, charismatic and manipulate men for their own gain. Salomé also shares similarities with Gwendolen and Cecily — she voices her opinions and speaks to men openly, like they do. Like Gwendolen, who disobeys her mother and accepts Jack’s marriage proposal without her mother’s permission, Salomé refuses to comply with her step-father’s orders and also refuses to be controlled by both him and her mother. She explicitly says, “I do not heed my mother. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan in a silver charger. You hath sworn, Herod. Forget not that you have sworn an oath” (Wilde, 1947, p. 28). Like a typical femme fatale, her beauty is grand and dangerous — throughout the entire play, the characters are warned not to look at her. The Page of Herodias warns the young Syrian multiple times, while Herodias does the same, but to her husband:

> *The Page of Herodias.* Do not look at her. I pray you not to look at her... Why do you speak to her? Why do you look at her? Oh! something terrible will happen. (Wilde, 1947, p. 5)

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> *Herodias.* You must not look at her! You are always looking at her! . . . There are others who look at her too much . . . You are looking again at my daughter. You must not look at her. I have already said so. . . I have told you not to look at her. (Wilde, 1947, p. 17-18)

Their warnings that something terrible will happen if Salomé looks back at them do not only foretell the tragic ending of the play and all the deaths that happen, but also speak of the important power that Salomé possesses. Alike Mrs. Erlynne, Salomé wields her beauty and charm in such a way that even the most obedient and powerful of men cannot resist her requests — she convinces the king’s soldiers to let her see Jokanaan, she manipulates the young Syrian, Narraboth, into bringing Jokanaan to her and she even succeeds into convincing the king himself into killing Jokanaan and giving her his head.

Salomé meets her death not when rejecting Herod's advances or demanding Jokanaan's head – she gets crushed under the soldiers' shields when she bites the lips of Jokanaan's severed head, which is the moment her desire manifests in the physical form. Salomé states that she was a virgin before meeting Jokanaan, who changed her and took her virginity:

> "What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire." (Wilde, 1947, p. 31)

She shamelessly displays her desire and sexuality, something Victorian women were not able to do. To earn Jokanaan's head, Salomé dances the Dance of the Seven Veils for Herod, a dance that is not described in the play, but is suspected to be sexual in nature. These are the reasons why some critics see Salomé as a positive feminist role model and a New Woman. Fernbach (2001, p. 213), says that she becomes a feminist by refusing to listen to Herod's orders and comply to the patriarchy she is living in, while in *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman*, Marcus (1988, p. 4) speaks of Salomé challenging the patriarchal religion by demanding Jokanaan's execution.

Since the play was never performed during Wilde's lifetime, he never got the chance to see it on stage and instruct the actresses that took on the role of Salomé on how to do the dance[2]. However, there are accounts that hint at Wilde's vision of the dance, which, according to people who knew him, was sexual, which further contributes to Wilde's modernity. According to Carrillo, Wilde often cited Joris-Karl Huysmans' words about Salomé, in which she was described as almost naked, shedding her veils in the heat of the dance, covered only in jewels (Carrillo, 1979, p. 195). After Aubrey Beardsley finished the illustrations for the play, according to Toni Bentley (2002), Wilde sent him a copy of the original French edition of the play, along with the message: "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance" (p. 31). Later on, when working on the illustrations for the British edition, Beardsley titled the image of the dance "The Stomach Dance". The illustration depicts Salomé with a bare chest and loose and sheer bottoms, indicating Salomé shedding the seven veils.

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[2] The play was considered blasphemous and was banned because Jokanaan's character was from the Bible, and Biblical characters could not be depicted on stage during the Victorian era (Marshall, 2007, p. 148).

Hyusmans words that Wilde often quoted, which describe an almost naked Salomé dancing passionately, and Wilde's approval of Beardsley's illustration of the dance confirm that Wilde envisioned the dance of the seven veils as sexual in nature. Wilde's Salomé states her mind, makes her choices, and openly expresses her desire and sexuality, just like a New Woman.

The dance is not the only instance in which Salomé expresses her sexuality. Salomé's desire is frightening — when she finally receives Jokanaan's head, Salomé monologizes about finally getting the chance to kiss him, and so she does, tasting the blood on his lips:

> Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit . . . Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?... But perchance it is the taste of love.... They say that love hath a bitter taste.... But what of that? what of that? I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan. (Wilde, 1947, p. 31)

This monstrous act is what pushes Herod to order her execution. Since she bites his mouth and tastes his blood, the act is associated with cannibalism, necrophilia and vampirism. Richard A. Kaye puts her into the same category with Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula and Dorian Gray, saying that the works they are in are terrifying metaphors for sexuality. "Degeneration, vampirism, syphilis, hysteria," he says, "would seem to be the metaphors by which many late-Victorians thought of sexuality and the erotic self" (Kaye, 2007, p. 53). Anne Varty (1998, p. 146) describes her as a vampire stripped of humanity, something less and more than human at the same time. Similarly, Mario Praz (1978, p. 299) speaks of Salomé capturing Jokanaan's lips in a vampire passion, while Mireille Dottin-Orsini (1994, p. 284) points out the similarity between Jokanaan's beheading and a vampire's bite on the throat.

Some critics see her as a cannibal. In *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*, Clair Rowden (2013, p. 184) speaks of Salomé's cannibalistic appetite that transgresses the sacred and the taboo. Indeed, Salomé says that she is hungry for his body and that wine nor apples can appease her desire, and compares Jokanaan's voice to wine, his hair to a cluster of grapes, and his mouth to a pomegranate that she wants to bite. In the article *Why Female Cannibals Frighten and Fascinate: The danger and appeal of the insatiable woman in Raw, Santa Clarita Diet, and The Lure*, Kate Robertson (2017) draws an interesting comparison between different female cannibals from movies and television shows, saying that the female cannibal captures the "ever-present social anxieties about gender, hunger, sex and empowerment". She calls her an extension of the femme fatale, and explains that the shock and fear that the character of the female cannibal evokes is related to the societal expectations of women keeping their appetites under control. It is not certain whether Wilde had female empowerment in mind when he let Salomé bite Jokanaan's lips, but he did allow Salomé to defeat Jokanaan, who treated her with prejudice.

It is arguable whether Salomé has won in the end or not. While she does die at the end of the play, she successfully manipulates Herod in front of all of his guests, obtains Jokanaan's head and kisses his lips. Similarly, it is debatable whether she is a feminist icon or just the favourite sexualized instrument of the Decadents, however, it is undeniable that Wilde's Salomé is not a silent tool of her mother and is a female character driven by her own motivations and desire.

Wilde's female characters speak volumes of his modernity and progressiveness. Cecily and Gwendolen from *The Importance of Being Earnest* are variations of the New Woman, a name that was used to signify women who defied societal expectations and wanted to improve their position in society, alike feminists and women's rights advocates who came after them. Gwendolen and Cecily, although shallow, are fond of reading and writing, and they speak to men openly and voice their opinions. Because of this, they do not fit the Victorian stereotype of the angel in the house, which described the ideal wife who listened to her husband without complains. What is more, by using the relationship these two young women have with their suitors and the marriage of Lady and Lord Bracknell, Wilde mocked the gender roles the Victorian society imposed upon men and women of the time and how the woman's place was only in the domestic sphere.

Another way in which Wilde was ahead of his time are his female characters who are fallen women, two of whom are Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Erlynne, the main characters of the plays *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, respectively. Both of them are strong and multi-dimensional female characters who have suffered at the hands of the society that shunned them. What is most important about their portrayals is how Wilde did not condemn them for being fallen. Unlike the Victorian society, which ostracized women who had relations with men before marriage and women who turned to sex work, Wilde did not mock and criticize his fallen women. Whether he intended to give his support to women being sexually liberated or not, it is undeniable that the ways in which Wilde portrayed and treated Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Erlynne's characters are positive. Additionally, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde provided a provoking commentary on motherhood, making a woman uninterested in being a mother the protagonist of the play. In the Victorian era, it was expected of women to want to be mothers, wives, and caretakers, since it was thought that they only belonged in the domestic sphere. Nowadays, women are more liberated, are members of all spheres, and have the opportunity to make their own choices regarding motherhood, which is why Mrs. Erlynne's character is revolutionary.

The play *Salomé* does not lack of progressiveness. The protagonist, the princess Salomé, is a woman who expresses her desire and sexuality in front of men and women alike. This fallen woman, who dies for her display of sexuality, speaks of her lust and uncovers her body, an exact opposite of how the Victorian society expected women to act. Salomé's character is significant not only because of Wilde's bold portrayal of female sexuality, which was unprecedented at the time, but also because she is not a passive instrument of her mother's whims. She is independent and liberated, unlike Victorian women, who were bound to their husbands and their homes.

Taking everything into account, some of Wilde's female characters are complex and multi-dimensional, and some of the topics he explored, including female sexuality, motherhood and gender roles, make his plays worthy of being called progressive and feminist.

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Резиме

ЗАМЕНА РОДНИХ УЛОГА, ЖЕНСКА СОЛИДАРНОСТ И ПОСРНУЛЕ ЖЕНЕ У ВАЈЛДОВИМ ДРАМАМА

Вајлдове драме *Битно је звати се Ернест, Жена без значаја, Лепеза госпође Виндермер* и *Салома* релевантне су за домен феминистичке критике због начина на који се баве заменом родних улога, солидарношћу међу женским ликовима и такозваним посрнулим женама (fallen women), а у контексту односа између мушкараца и жена, брака, сложености женских ликова, родних улога и начина на који су оне приказане. У драми *Битно је звати се Ернест*, Вајлд је исмејао родне улоге у Викторијанском друштву и како су мушкарци имали моћ над женама, док у драмама *Жена без значаја, Лепеза госпође Виндермер* и *Салома*, главни ликови су посрнуле жене, стереотип који су Викторијанци осмислили да би обележили жене које су сматрали нечистима. Битно је поменути да Вајлдове посрнуле жене нису приказане у негативном светлу: *Жена без значаја* и *Лепеза госпође Виндермер* су драме о потешкоћама које је етикета посрнуле жене нанела двема женама које су направиле грешке у прошлости и пријатељствима које оне формирају са другим женским ликовима, док је трагедија *Салома* о жени која умире због чина који је у очима друштва обележава као посрнулу. Уз наведено, рад ће истражити и друге блиско повезане теме, као што су мајчинство, сексуалност и негативни родни стереотипи.

Кључне речи: Вајлд; феминизам; женски ликови; родне улоге; сексуалност.

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