

Entrenched Patriarchal Victorian Society in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's forte is his adroit portraiture of women and philosophical issues without sacrificing the aesthetic finesse of his art. Exhibiting profound understanding of the predicament of women and their spaces, his work negotiates the human crisis against the entrenched patriarchal Victorian society. Wilde traverses the broad and often conflicting sweep of private and public life, using his singularly personal rationale for women typified as fallen, good, young, or innocent. His comedies weave them into a complex paradigm and explicitly bringing to bear the heroine pushed to the brink of despair by her lover's deception. A state of change and development marked the Victorian era at the very pinnacle of British imperialism, buoyed by rapidly growing business and markets. Contemporaneously, English society made a concerted effort to adopt and advocate strict rules of proper 'English' social behaviour. The literary world of nineteenth century Britain juxtaposed these mores with the desire to attain positions of privilege. Book after book glorified the "right choices," with protagonists wedded to partners from the privileged classes or trying to acquire a higher education. The Biblical injunction of "Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies" seemed to define the paramount importance Victorian society attached to virtue; immoral behaviour was consequently inadmissible, at any cost. Women were therefore epitomised and straight jacketed as the docile and humble "Angel in the House," as Coventry Patmore wrote: "Her disposition is devout, Her countenance angelical."¹ Suffering was a natural, common

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¹ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Cassell & Company, Limited, 1891), p. 39.

currency in the life of women in the nineteenth century, where women were terribly suppressed in every sphere of life.

A Woman of No Importance

A Woman of No Importance weighs the blatant socialism of the upper-class Victorian men against the enforced suffering of women in the process of their public and private lives. Though this play is often regarded as the weakest of Oscar Wilde's plays, it showcases social and psychological issues with great sensitivity and understanding. The heroine of the play, Rachel Arbuthnot, undertakes total responsibility for her son from her lover Lord Illingworth who left her betrayed and deserted. In the face of untold trauma, she assiduously raises this son for twenty long years, and endeavours to make him a socially responsible person. The Victorian society may have fostered self reliance among women, but its moral code and stigma stifled their natural instincts, and emboldened infanticide to shield premarital conception from the law.

Wilde's earlier play *Lady Windermere's Fan* also dealt with the travails of a child conceived outside the parameters of a legal marriage. Yet the two plays are markedly different in their response to the dilemma of a child outside wedlock and the repositioning of the women concerned. Mrs Erlynne of *Lady Windermere's Fan* unceremoniously abandons the child to its fate and realigns her position in society through her feminine prowess. In dramatic contrast Rachel Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* rears her child with utmost care and reclaims her societal acceptance by focussing on religious duties; albeit she is feminist not by choice but by chance. In addition, the intriguing psychological dividend in the mother-son relationship is deeply evocative and artistically more satisfying than *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The values of decadent Aestheticism are more prominently displayed in *A Woman of No Importance* than its predecessor. Lord Illingworth, the rich man who seduces and leaves Rachel, unmistakably embodies the values of Decadent Aestheticism, which were opposed to the conventional and inflexible views governing the extant society. Lord Illingworth, the antagonist, emerges as the more interesting character by epitomizing the values of Decadent Aestheticism. In contrast, the high moral Rachel Arbuthnot and the American heiress Hester Worsley, though sucked into a vortex of despair, garner relatively less attention.

The Entrenched Patriarchal Society

Beyond the conventional binary of seduced and seducer, this play interrogates a deeper interpretation of the power relationship between man and woman. Wilde redefines and challenges stereotypes through the characters in the play. Sos Eltis discusses 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 recasts these conventional elements in order to question the sexual and social mores on which they were based.²

This drama is critically reviewed by audiences and critics to illustrate the predicament of women. For instance, it is noted that she never used the occasions of her meeting with her husband as an opportunity for blackmail. Her refusal to take the easy path to respectability by marrying Illingworth was commended by well regarded reviewers.

With the exception of Rachel, her son Gerald, Hester Worsley, the Member of Parliament Mr Kelvil, and Archdeacon Daubeny, all the other prominent characters in *A Woman of No Importance* are drawn from elite upper class, with their women living proudly in the lap of luxury empowered by wealthy income and considering working for living as *infra dig*. In the third act of the play Lord Illingworth asks his illegitimate son Gerald if he knows of the British peerage; its very juxtaposition with the events that were being played out makes the audience wonder if Illingworth is trying to underscore his personal worth as a parent.

Notes on the peerage at this point are relevant to this narrative. The British peerage is a statutory system in England sanctioned by the monarch. During the Victorian Era, it had nearly 1500 aristocratic families whose order, ranks and privileges and protocols were strictly regulated and ordered. A peer's title was invariably thrust upon the eldest son of the family, with the other sons given the freedom to lead their own lives on their allocated parental income. Since earning a living was not quite *de rigueur*, falling into debt was commonplace if not expected. Lord Alfred Rufford in *A Woman of No Importance* is the quintessential peer, unapologetically smoking exorbitant cigarettes on borrowed money. These feudal lords were spendthrifts, immaculately fashionable, wastrels, who

² Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 96.

“sowed the wild oats” with unfortunate women; leaving them to bear the brunt of disrepute and burden of illegitimate children.

Lord Illingworth was Arthur’s younger sibling and therefore not eligible to inherit the title or estate. His mother, Lady Cecilia, bore his daily expenses to sustain his station of life. Over time, Lord Illingworth happened to meet Rachel and neither honoured this relationship nor owned his child due to various exigencies. Rachel, in turn, was unable to come to terms with Illingworth’s continual postponement of their marriage, and eventually took the final irreconcilable step of moving away with their child. To reinforce the theme of entitled wastrels, Lady Caroline’s brother Lord Henry is also presented as ruining the lives of many women in the Victorian society.

Wilde does not paint an endearing picture of the institution of marriage among the rich and titled. Lord Illingworth does not consider marrying Rachel necessary; his uncle Lord Hensy has numerous illicit relationships, and his mother is into her fourth marriage. Lady Caroline works hard keeping a strict eye on her fourth husband, Sir John, for fear of being cuckolded. Mrs Allonby not only has illicit liaisons with Lord Illingworth but brazenly stands up to her husband Ernest in public. In fact, in keeping with undercurrent of infidelity, no other couple (except Lady Caroline and Sir John) is present at the party where much of the story takes place, nor anywhere else in the play itself.

By portraying the protagonist’s struggle to prove herself as real heroine by going against the tide, the play underscores rites of patriarchy, suppression of women’s freedom and the massive class divide in the Victorian society. British feminism was in its infancy, patriarchy still ruled the day; after marriage, women and their belongings were considered their husband’s property. Though divorce took place as per the law, it was perceived as a punishment especially since it entailed social alienation. Virginity was a social index skewed in favor of the upper class and males; upper class women were expected to be virgins until marriage, whereas men of the same class had freedom to get into adulterous relationships with poor women. Oscar Wilde was against the ill treatment of women both in law and practice. In this context, Walter Winston Kenilworth offers comments in his book *A Study of Oscar Wilde*.

He [Wilde] hoped for a brighter future for womanhood, when it should take part in the deliberations of the nations and should take its seat in the jurisdiction of the world. His aspirations included for womanhood complete emancipation in all forms. He was never

mean. Whatever he saw to be right, he announced that. He could not be insincere with truth. He saw that conditions of society, particularly in the realm of politics, tended to hamper the natural and personal development of women; and that unless they asserted themselves, all hope would be lost. He regarded them not only as women, but as equals and counterparts of men in the effort to enunciate the human realities.³

The Putative Feminism of Rachel and Hester

This play, first performed in 1893, juxtaposes a sort of putative feminism through two important characters: Rachel Arbuthnot and Hester Worsley. The feminist standpoint of these characters also provides a detailed social significance to the play. By the time the play begins, the main female character has shielded her true identity as unwed mother for twenty years. Her successful concealment of her true identity for many years is a great achievement, empowered by her church and parish work and the choice of a community simple life for herself. Only the dire consequences of Gerald being treated as a bastard forced Rachel to divulge her identity as an unwed mother, painstakingly cultivated over two decades of exemplary behaviour. Though the 1834 Law Amendment Act created certain flexibilities for the maintenance of children born before marriage and obliged the fathers concerned to support them, this was never implemented in letter and spirit.

Rachel withstands it all bravely. She never acquiesces to the pressure exerted by society one way or the other. Where others in her position would have yielded to the pressure and lost their integrity, she overcomes all problems with fortitude and leads a dignified life. Consequently, she is able to bring up Gerald as a productive person member of the society without access to Eton or Oxford; he eventually earns his living as a bank clerk, a highly laudable achievement. Rachel's feminist ideology emerged even more forcefully through her firm decision not to marry the man who had put her through this ordeal, rejecting all notions of repentance and abjuring sin. This stance is particularly noteworthy given the fact she does not lead a peaceful life, nor feels gratified with her life as unwed mother, but that she actively chooses to be sincere and honest. She does not want to revisit her ordeal, nor can she overcome her disgust for Illingworth by thoughts of marriage.

³ Walter Winston Kenilworth, *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (New York: R.F. Fenno & Company, 1912), pp. 71-85.

Hester has grown up as a Puritan and initially holds the view that a “woman who has sinned should be punished.”⁴ She agrees that “God’s law is only Love” and that there is nothing greater than that.⁵ Further, the fact that Rachel allows Hester to love Gerald advocates the significance of family bonding. Feminism calls for women to come together in cordial relationship of love, and this is what Hester and Rachel aim to accomplish. Thus, it is clear that Rachel does not need the support of a man, and that Hester also aspires to love Gerald as husband without claims of ownership. Judith Butler discusses the problems of feminist theory in her book *Gender Troubles*, stating that “For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued.”⁶

Puritanism Versus Decadent Aestheticism

For Rachel, religion becomes both a camouflage and an act of courage, as through being religious she accrues social recognition. She confesses, “And you [Gerald] thought I spent too much of my time in going to Church, and in Church duties. But where else could I turn? God’s house is the only house where sinners are made welcome, and you were always in my heart, Gerald, too much in my heart.”⁷ She becomes habituated to praying every day and going to church to receive self-consolation. This engenders a Puritanical frame of mind, which aligns with her vehement rejection of Lord Illingworth’s advances.

Hester’s Puritanism has a long history behind it, and she appears to hold her beliefs rather dearly, unlike the hypocritical party guests of Lady Hunstanton. The American Puritans who set up their life in New England and in the impoverished city of Boston later split away from groups of Christians and sought to reconstruct the Church of England. They believed they were demi-gods, and that all human beings are fallible. Therefore, they claimed, most people suffer eternally, and God punishes only a few to draw them towards realisation. For them salvation depends not on their manifest

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, ed. Jim Manis (State College: The Pennsylvania State University, 2006), p. 50.

⁵ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 64.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Problems: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: London, 1999), p. 3.

⁷ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 62.

behaviour, but on moving their hearts and souls and by means of unremitting discipline. Francis J. Bremer details the basic tenets of Puritanism in his book *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*:

Like other religious faiths, the core of puritanism was an understanding of God and the individual's relationship to God. The starting point for puritan theology was a realization that attempting to understand the supernatural was, as St. Paul expressed it, to look through a glass darkly. Even without accounting for the effects of original sin, natural minds could not understand the supernatural, which by definition was beyond their experience. As the English clergyman Richard Sibbes wrote, it was possible to apprehend God but not to comprehend him.⁸

Lord Illingworth confirms the significance of Puritanism in *A Woman of No Importance*. From the ideological point of view, the disparity in this drama is truly between Hester's Puritanism and Lord Illingworth's Decadent Aestheticism. In the context of internal dynamics of *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth's contrast to Hester's Puritanical philosophy is very significant. Though this difference of ideologies is artistically satisfying, in the final interpretation neither of them is successful. The most important clarifications in the play are no longer made on the basis of the ideologies. These decisions are taken either on the practical considerations or emotional points of view. Further, Illingworth's diatribe against puritan ideology in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1890 blames the tradition for human social taboos:

The puritan Spirit is greatly to blame for restraints and emphasis on sex... it casts an ugly, self-conscious light upon all things where in men and women are concerned, creating evil where none need be; it fosters a heated, unnatural atmosphere, and makes artificial sins which are parents of a swarm of unnecessary sorrows.⁹

Towards end of Act IV of the drama, the fact of reconciliation between separated couple Rachel and Lord Illingworth turns out to be an unexpected adjunct. The reunion solves the reservations about their past and the present psychological problems. Previously, Lord Illingworth has been fighting a battle of wits with the likes of Mrs Allonby; but now he engages fully with the main female character of the play. The conflict between the past and future magnifies their deep-seated animosity. At the outset, Rachel tries to convince Gerald not to accept Illingworth's offer as

⁸ Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 34-47.

⁹ Mona Caird, 'The Morality of Marriage', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 47 (March 1890), p. 323.

he is neither suitable nor qualified. On his part, Lord Illingworth claims rather humorously that the boy belongs to him, and he has every right to go about securing his legacy. Since she kept Gerald for twenty years for herself, he does feel it is his turn now. He also points out that Gerald's future is far more important than her wretched past. Lord Illingworth's obvious desire to own the boy is juxtaposed against a personal yearning for solace, leading to the admission that "It is a curious thing, Rachel; my life seemed to be quite complete. It was not so. It lacked something, it lacked a son. I have found my son now, I am glad I have found him."¹⁰ Illingworth is not quite objective and rational while offering Gerald the job, overlooking as he did the obvious lack of "proper" qualifications for being the Private Secretary. The fact is that he genetically shows a great affection for his son and he recognised his own behaviour in the boy.

In the case of Rachel, she values her son's life beyond everything else in her life. Gerald not only embodies her all her hopes and success but is the sole repository of all her love and motherhood. She is therefore all the more reluctant to surrender Gerald to Illingworth and allow him the psychological victory by experiencing fatherhood and filial affection. Psychological history is replete with events of parents on child custody, not precisely because they adore the children *per se*, but to deprive the other party of the pleasure of parenthood. Lord Illingworth and Rachel appear to be playing out a similar sequence in their lives. However, Lord Illingworth does not admit it, while Rachel does. Since no amount of "reasoning" works, she makes a strong emotional appeal to Lord Illingworth to keep the boy for herself.

Though Rachel's history showcases a deep emotional trauma, they fail to impact Gerald, as they seem to have become irrelevant in the present context. Gerald seems more taken up by the idea of earning Hester's love, asking her to accept his love and setting up a family and productive career. His mother has used the wrong instruments of persuasion and pleading; it will probably take something far more disturbing in terms of physical action for him to make up his mind.

It is this very opportunity that is presented through Lord Illingworth's heterosexual overtures to Hester at the end of the third act. At a party, Mrs Allonby lightly challenges Lord Illingworth to take Hester; his resulted attempted kiss is misinterpreted by all. Hester, who is a Puritan, especially misinterprets it as an attack on her physical integrity and as an

¹⁰ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 36.

act of outrage. She is terrified and comes out from the room at Hunstanton Chase and throws herself into the arms of Gerald, yelling for a while, “Oh! save me—save me from him! ... He has insulted me! Horribly insulted me! Save me.”¹¹ Gerald’s emotions veer between fear and anger regarding Lord Illingworth; his psychological reaction does not factor his mother’s plight or the injustice to an unfortunate girl. Lord Illingworth’s open denial seems to have carried the day, underlined by his confession of lack of courage to act immorally. Yet when it happens to somebody Gerald loves and intends to marry, he becomes very angry. Interjected onto the scene of combat, Gerald now sees Lord Illingworth as a competitor, which infuriates him intolerably. In great rage, he yells: “Lord Illingworth, you have insulted the purest thing on God’s earth, a thing as pure as my own mother. You have insulted the woman I love most in the world with my own mother. As there is a God in Heaven, I will kill you.”¹² This forces Rachel to reveal the secret of Lord Illingworth being his father: “Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father.”¹³ Subsequently, Gerald was taken aback that his mother adored him greatly and tries to bring about the marriage between her and Lord Illingworth. In a meantime, Hester overhears their conversation and empathises with Rachel.

The next day, Illingworth appears to be in a great hurry to go to Hunstanton Chase to meet the friends of his circle, suggesting no lasting effect of the “tumultuous revelations.” The previous night is just a disturbance in his happy life, leaving Rachel a concubine and Gerald a fatherless boy. “It’s been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one’s own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one’s mistress, and one’s son.”¹⁴

It is not so easy to bear the unbearable situation that has taken place. Yet presently, Rachel is not desired to accept it. She takes up one of his gloves and beats him on the face. With this symbolic gesture, she reinforces years of humiliation prevailed upon her by refusing to get married to her. Her hatred for him has grown so immensely for twenty years that that a man of some importance has been completely reduced in her perspective. Thus, when Gerald asks her who has been calling upon his and Hester’s

¹¹ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 54

¹² Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 54.

¹³ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 69.

absence, she replies, “Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance.”¹⁵

The defeat suffered by Illingworth is conceived by Peter Raby as the defeat of the old order by the present generation: “Illingworth has been defeated by youth, by that ‘fin de siècle person’, the pretty Puritan. His is the defeat of age, of aristocracy, of the old England; of everything that is suggested by the manicured lawns and terraces of Hunstanton.”¹⁶ However, it is no longer the defeat of individuality of Lord Illingworth, but the defeat of the elite dogmatic ideology which he represents.

This defeat does not embody the triumph of foe ideology of Puritanism, supported by Hester. At this juncture, John Calvin explores the importance of religious aspects in the interpretation of his religious book by stating that,

The moral law, then, (to begin with it), being contained under two heads, the one of which simply enjoins us to worship God with pure faith and piety, the other to embrace men with sincere affection, is the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times, who would frame their life agreeably to the will of God. For his eternal and immutable will is, that we are all to worship him, and mutually love one another.¹⁷

Oscar Wilde has certainly deconstructed Calvin’s postulations of love, privileges and the overarching control of all facets of human life. Hence, in *A Woman of No Importance*, what succeeds is natural philosophy of love as conveyed by Jesus. Wilde contrasts the mellowed couple in the drama whose love has evolved into honesty and commitment, against their younger, brash, and callous selves decades ago. The legal/illegal, privileged/underprivileged West/Europe and Puritan/liberal binaries which tore them asunder could be now empathetic and endorsed by their true love for one another.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play *A Woman of No Importance* is the lens through which the entrenched patriarchal Victorian society is scrutinised. It is apparent that the male counterparts demonstrate a complete lack of

¹⁵ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 70.

¹⁶ Peter Raby, ‘Wilde’s Comedies of Society’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 143-60.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), p. 15.

empathy towards the female protagonists, Rachel and Hester, and their severely compromised roles in society. The lack of empathy is sanctioned by the contemporary English society's concerted effort at adopting and advocating strict rules of the proper "English" social behaviour. The purported behavioral norms for women are revealed in telling contrast to the flagrant uncensored license given to the peerage, especially their male members. What Lord Illingworth can casually put aside becomes a lifelong scar for Rachel. Religion, another important leitmotif of the Victorian society, lends a sense of identity, worth and societal recognition to its followers; Rachel takes shelter under its wings to eke out a semblance of respectability. Blood is certainly thicker than water at all instances of the play; so Rachel does all she can to give Gerald her son a proper upbringing. When Gerald's path crosses with that of his father, the latter cannot but come to terms with his past and embrace his son. Patriarchal mores are never far away, and Gerald is the quintessential male when he will forsake all for Hester. From being a woman of no importance, Rachel's evolution offers hope for women subjugated by patriarchy, while her final rejection of Illingworth, makes him in his turn, a man of no worth.

A singularly damning image of patriarchy placed on the proscenium in 1893, when the play was first performed, and its echoes are still heard over a century later. For men in general and the peerage in particular, might was right and immorality overlooked. For women, subjugation by men and society was deemed fit and immorality was a life-long punishable offense. The desideratum of attaining positions of privilege was paramount as was the value placed on virtue for women. It is not insignificant that the play was first performed in the final decade of Queen Victoria's sixty-three-year reign. Therefore, the intense patriarchy is even more paradoxical but endorsed by the very pinnacle of British imperialism, buoyed by rapidly growing business and markets.