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The 'Fallen Woman' Motif in Two Plays by Oscar Wilde

Nicoleta-Mariana IFTIMIE[1]*

Abstract

In order to place Oscar Wilde's interpretation of gender stereotypes and gender roles in a proper context, we should view it against the doctrine of the 'separation of spheres', which was prevalent in Victorian England. According to this doctrine, a woman was restricted within the confines of the domestic or private sphere, being attributed the roles of wife and mother. Women who conformed to the ideal wife and mother stereotype were also eulogized on stage, while those who departed from the norm were regarded as outcasts and were shut off from fashionable society. The 'fallen woman' motif is apparent in Wilde's society comedies. The characters that seem to embody this stereotype are Mrs. Erlynne in "Lady Windermere's Fan" and Mrs. Arbuthnot in "A Woman of No Importance." Each of them tries to hide a 'shameful secret': Mrs. Erlynne, the apparent homewrecker and seductress, wants to conceal her former abandonment of husband and child in favour of a lover who abandoned her later on; Mrs Arbuthnot, the stern woman and dutiful mother, tries to conceal the fact that she had been seduced by Lord Illingworth in her youth and had given birth to an illegitimate son. This study focuses on the two characters mentioned above in order to show the way in which Wilde exploited conventional gender roles and stereotypes, by playing the double game of conforming to and at the same time departing from expected conventions.

Keywords: Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, the fallen woman, the shameful secret, motherhood.

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1. Introduction

In order to place Wilde's handling of the well-known motif of the 'fallen woman' in a suitable context, it is important to view it against the of the pervasive Victorian England doctrine of the 'separation of spheres', which imposed clear gender roles and double standards for men and women. In this patriarchal family model, the two genders were traditionally attributed dichotomic characteristics: thus, men were regarded as "career-oriented, active, independent, dominant, strong, coarse, while women were considered home-oriented, passive, dependent, submissive, weak, delicate, even fragile" [1 p243]. Men, the breadwinners and providers for the whole family, were attributed the public/social sphere; on the other hand, women were restricted to the private/domestic sphere, responsible with household activities and childcare, being bestowed upon the roles of wives and mothers. Motherhood was regarded as the highest role a woman could have. Failure for the woman to conform to such standards - unmarried women bearing a child or wives that deserted their husbands for a lover - resulted in ostracism and banishment from high society. On the other hand, men who deserted the pregnant women they had seduced or who committed adultery received no punishment from society. Hence the existence of a double standard applied to the two genders, which was at work in the period both in real life and in the theatre. Out of Wilde's comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (*LWF*) and *A Woman of No Importance* (*WNI*) place at their centre a woman trying to conceal a shameful secret from her past: Mrs. Erlynne, the apparent homewrecker and seductress tries to hide her abandonment of husband and child twenty years before, while Rachel Arbuthnot, the stern woman and dutiful mother wants to conceal the fact that she had been seduced by a man and had given birth to an illegitimate son.

2. Theoretical background: good and bad women

The 'fallen woman' became a traditional motif in the 19th century theatre in her many facets: fallen mother, adulteress or adventuress. This motif should be seen against the framework of the social, political, moral and religious context of the time, in which the pure and good women, the 'angels in the house' were eulogized and were opposed to the women who deserted from the roles of wives and mothers.

The requirements of women playing their long-established gender roles were moral purity, sensibility, kindness, submissiveness, dutifulness,

devotion and self-sacrifice as can be seen from this idealized portrait made by William Acton, as quoted in Nead:

> a perfect ideal of an English wife and mother, kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake [2 p18].

The dictum 'A woman's place is at home' clearly established the role of women, considered fragile and pure beings in need for protection. The two genders were thus seen as separate, but complementary and interdependent as John Ruskin pointed out in *Sesame and Lilies*:

> Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other…the man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision...Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but she infallibly judges the crown of contest [3 p150-151].

The gentle, loving, innocent 'good woman' was counterbalanced in real life and in literature by the vulgar, selfish, impure 'bad' woman. Even in the passive version represented by the innocent young girl who had been seduced and then abandoned, the 'fallen woman' was seen as a danger to the whole society, as she disrupted the well-established gender roles of the patriarchal English society. Once lost, a woman's good reputation could hardly, if ever be re-established:

> In those halcyon days the flirtations of a married woman assumed a horrendous significance; reputation seemed vastly more important than character; a woman with a past could not aspire to a future as well [4 p213-214].

In *La Dame aux Camélias*, Marguerite Gauthier, the 'fallen woman' of Dumas' novel speaks about the inescapable, terrible fate waiting for her:

> And so, whatever she may do, the woman, once she has fallen can never rise again. God may forgive her, perhaps, the world, never. What man would wish to make her his wife, what child to call her mother? [5 Act III p140-141].

Such a woman would lose her identity, becoming a 'fallen woman', a 'lost woman', a 'woman of the streets' or at least a 'woman without character.'

Those who truly repented had to show their sincerity by going to a convent, doing good deeds for the poor (like Mrs. Arbuthnot in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*) or making restitution for those they had wronged.

Mrs. Erlynne, the 'fallen woman' in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, mocks at these staple punishments 19th century literature thought proper for women who deviated from the established norms:

> I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels [6 p425].

3. Argument of the paper

In his society comedies, Oscar Wilde takes over the 'fallen woman' stereotype and questions its validity. This article will focus on two such plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*. The characters that seem to embody this stereotype are Mrs. Erlynne in the former play and Mrs. Arbuthnot in the latter. Each of them tries to hide a 'shameful secret'.

This study focuses on the elusive nature of Wilde's plays, in order to show the way in which Wilde exploited conventional gender roles and stereotypes, by playing the double game of conforming to and at the same time departing from expected conventions.

4. Arguments to support the thesis: the double game

4.1 The fallen woman: homewrecker or homebuilder?

Out of the different roles played by a woman, of prime importance was that of the mother. The fallen woman as a mother represented a specific threat for 19th century English society, because it aimed at the very foundations of the 'happy English home'. If in the literature of the epoch the adventuress type could be forgiven and could in the end return to society, the deserting mother was allowed to return to her children's lives again only by stealth.

This is in fact what Mrs. Erlynne does when she returns to her child on her coming-of–age birthday in Wilde's first successful play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* that opened at St. James's Theatre in 1892. Having abandoned husband and child some twenty years before in favour of a lover that abandoned her later on (as she was reproachfully reminded by Lord Windermere), Mrs. Erlynne re-visits her daughter (now a married woman) on her coming-of-age birthday party as an unknown guest invited by her son-in-law. Her reasons, however, do not spring only from newly-born motherly feelings: Mrs. Erlynne had first contacted Lord Windermere, her daughter's husband, who, afraid lest his wife should learn the truth about her own mother's past conduct, had given her large sums of money. As Lord

Windermere points out, "One day you read in the newspapers that she had married a rich man. You saw your hideous chance... You began your blackmailing" [6 p424].

Within the template of the French *well-made play*, Wilde uses and explores the stereotypes of the fallen woman and sacrificial mother only to put them on their head and demolish them. As Bose [7 p106] points out, even before Mrs. Erlynne's appearance on stage in Act II, we are warned that she is a woman of disreputable character and dubious morality by three different characters: Lord Darlington, in an allusive manner, The Duchess of Berwick's gossip and Lord Windermere's acknowledgement that she is a woman with a past trying to re-enter society. During the ball scene in Act II this idea is stressed by means of non-verbal elements, mainly costume, gestures and stage grouping. Thus, when Mrs Erlynne appears, the stage directions indicate that she is "very beautifully dressed" [6 p400]. Her beautiful apparel, which says something about the kind of woman she was, is noticed by Lady Plymdale as it was before by the Duchess of Berwick. The men, on the other hand, try to deny knowing her (Dumby) or avoid introducing her to respectable relatives (Cecil Graham). In various theatre and film productions of the play Mrs. Erlynne's position as an outsider is underlined by her isolation from the other female characters on stage when she first makes her entrance. Another scene in which she appears isolated from everybody on stage is the scene at the end of Act Three, a silent tableau of ostracism, as the stage directions indicate: "Lord Windermere looks at her in contempt. Lord Darlington in mingled astonishment and anger. Lord Augustus turns away. The other men smile at each other" [6 p 419]. As some authors [8, 9] point out, in the early productions of the play a strong visual effect was provided by costume and significant groupings of characters (proxemic relations). There was a contrast between the men dressed in black and white garments, gathered on one side of the stage and the isolation of the one woman, the beautifully dressed Mrs. Erlynne, appearing from the inner room at the other side. The symbolic grouping of characters at the close of the third act is the prelude to Mrs. Erlynne's renewed divorce from fashionable society and anticipates a change in her relationships with Lady Windermere and Lord Windermere.

In his portrayal of Mrs. Erlynne as a fallen woman and mother, Wilde both conforms to the stereotype and departs from it significantly, questioning the value of well-established norms and arbitrary divisions of people into 'good' and 'bad'. She is a self-centered person, that is true, who blackmails her own son-in-law for money and admittance in high society. On the other hand, she has true motherly feelings and convinces Lady Windermere not to repeat the mistake she made in the past. In order to

persuade her daughter to return to her husband, Mrs. Erlynne resorts to logical appeal, psychological appeal and personal appeal (logos, pathos and ethos). As far as logical appeals are concerned, she adopts a mode of reasoning based on *analogy* and on *deduction*. Her sample of deductive reasoning is called *enthymeme*.

> Even if he had a thousand loves, you must stay with child. If he was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you, your place is with your child [6 p413].

The premises used by Mrs. Erlynne are based on probabilities, that is why the enthymeme is 'open' at some point, i.e. there is a gap in the reasoning. The speaker speculates this characteristic in order to make the recipient (Lady Windermere) 'fill' the gaps. She resorts in fact to a demonstration 'ad absurdum' in order to manipulate her interlocutor and throw doubts upon her beliefs. At the same time, Mrs. Erlynne appeals to Lady Windermere's motivations, to her feelings and values, to her social identity (psychological appeal), by projecting the consequences of Lady Windermere's purpose-success action:

> You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at - to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don't know what it is. One pays for ones sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays [6 p413].

Mrs. Erlynne's use of personal appeal has a great persuasive power upon her listener. Since Lady Windermere considers her a rival and has no idea that the person in front of her is in fact her mother, Mrs. Erlynne has to create an attitude of trust and friendliness, while not disclosing her real identity and feelings; the sordid life of a social outcast she portrays to Lady Windermere is in fact her own life. The deontic world projected by Mrs. Erlynne is founded on necessity and obligation and is expressed through a series of directives: "You must go back to your husband's house… You must leave this place at once… You must come with me… You must stay with your child" [6 p413]. While at the beginning of their encounter Lady Windermere is convinced of the necessity of leaving her husband "I feel that nothing in the whole world would induce me to live under the same roof as Lord Windermere" [6 p411]. after Mrs. Erlynne's speech she becomes convinced of the necessity expressed by a contrary proposition: "Take me home. Take me home" [6 p413]. Lady Windermere appeals to Mrs. Erlynne almost as if she instinctively recognised their relationship. The stage

directions underline this idea: Lady Windermere is "holding out her hands to her, helplessly as a child might do" [6 p413]. The irony here is that the woman believed to be a homewrecker, a rival in love is in fact a homebuilder.

The elusive and at the same time ironic nature of the play resides in the fact that two stereotypes of the epoch, that of the fallen woman and of the motherly mother are made to stand on their head. The fallen woman is not really fallen and, although regretting her past, she neither retires into a convent nor does she repent by doing some kind of charity work. Far from that, she really prospers at the end through her prospective marriage to Lord Augustus. On the other hand, although once in her life she acts as a true mother and convinces her daughter not to leave her husband, Mrs. Erlynne ironically admits a mother's role does not fit her: "...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" [6 p425].

4.2 The fallen woman: virtuous Puritan and possessive mother

Although also regarded as a society comedy, the atmosphere in Wilde's *Woman of No Importance* is less serene and more rigid than in the earlier play, mainly because of the two main female characters who are confirmed Puritans, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester Worsley. If in *Lady Windermere's Fan* men's roles are defined in relation to women, in *A Woman of No Importance* the women's role has become more important, for they are the ones who "orchestrate all movement of the play" [7 p118]. In contrast to the real world where women's roles at the time were defined in relation to males, in *A Woman of No Importance* it is men who are defined through their relation to women. Gerald, Rachel Arbuthnot's son, now a handsome young man, is defined by his relationship to his mother and Hester, his would-be wife. He has become a kind of slave to women, just like Sir John, who is patronized and supervised by his wife, Lady Caroline.

In *A Woman of No Importance* the representatives of the female gender appear as tyrannical, emasculating figures trying to enslave men. As Lord Illingworth puts it, "The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts" [10 p460]. This idea is very far from the prevalent 'angel in the house' image; moreover, if in the 19th century women were still regarded as their husband's property, Wilde's play reverses the accepted norm, for in Mrs. Allonby's opinion "[a]ll men are married women's property" [10 p444]. Therefore, in the play, with few exceptions, men are kept on a small leash.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, the 'fallen woman' in the play is from many points of view Mrs. Erlynne's opposite: a stern and dutiful woman, who takes care of the poor and those in need, the epitome of piousness, dressed in simple, black apparel, a single mother who has taken good care of her child, but is unable to let him go and find his own way. Thus, as Bose points out, in *A Woman of No Importance* we witness a double paradox: "the fallen woman is the most virtuous and the best mother the most harmful" [7 p2]. Even before Mrs. Arbuthnot's entrance in Act II, she is introduced as an object-of-discourse by Lady Hunstanton in terms that highlight her goodness and piousness: "Oh! she is very feminine, Caroline, and so good, too. You should hear what the Archdeacon says of her. He regards her as his right hand in the parish" [10 p440]. The same Lady Hunstanton introduces Mrs. Arbuthnot to Hester as "one of the good, sweet, simple people" [10 p450]. Later on in the play, in Act IV, Lady Hunstanton reiterates her admiration for Gerald's mother: "Mrs. Arbuthnot doesn't know anything about the wicked society in which we all live... She is far too good. I consider it was a great honour her coming to me last night [10 p471]. Although "a little lax about people", [10 p431] Lady Hunstanton is right in her appreciation of Rachel Arbuthnot. According to the standards of the time, Rachel Arbuthnot - who had been seduced in her young age by George Illingworth, had eloped with him and had given birth to a child - would fall into the category of the 'fallen woman', a woman who has sinned and has to repent and make amends. Contrary to expectations raised by the 'fallen woman' stereotype within the template of 19th century melodrama, Mrs. Arbuthnot does not repent for her past sin. Her confession to Gerald, although somewhat melodramatic and pathetic, points out clearly the fruit of her sin became her own blessing in life: "... though day after day, at morn or evensong, I have knelt in God's house, I have never repented for my sin" [10 p475].

Expectations regarding gender roles established by the patriarchal society of the time, as well as stereotypes established by the patterns of melodrama are raised and then played with: the 'fallen woman' in the play is in fact a good woman, and Lady Hunstanton is right in calling her so; the final reunion of mother and father in matrimony, which in canonical melodrama may symbolize redemption for a 'fallen woman', is strongly refused by Mrs. Arbuthnot, in spite of the fact that Gerald, her own son, asks her to do that. She is supported in this decision by Hester, the woman Gerald is in love with. Moreover, in the last scene between her and Lord Illingworth, Rachel Arbuthnot takes her revenge by slapping him on the face with his glove when, after refusing his proposal in marriage, he mocks at her. This combination of traditional feminine response to male sexual aggressiveness (let us remember than the glove is a symbol of femininity)

and coded traditional duel provoking behaviour, specific to the masculine gender is loaded with eroticism and can be read as "an act of female sexual aggression leaving the man humiliated and symbolically castrated", [11 p72] turning him into "a man of no importance" [10 p481]. This last line of the play echoes the title, while replacing the generic 'woman' with 'man.'

As shown above, the 'perfect mother' stereotype is also played with. According to the pathetic confession made to her son, Rachel Arbuthnot is what might be called the perfect mother: "Gerald, when you were naked I clothed you, when you were hungry I gave you food. Night and day all that long winter I tended you [10 p474-475]. Yet this sacrificial mother asks in return a huge sacrifice from her son by binding him to her (and to Hester, his fiancée) forever. In her first discussion with Lord Illingworth, Mrs. Arbuthnot says no to the prospects of a successful career for her son, simply because of selfish reasons. In one of the few moments of revolt, Gerald reproaches his mother:

> You have always tried to crush my ambition, mother - haven't you? You have told me that the world is a wicked place, that success is not worth having, that society is shallow, all that sort of thing - well, I don't believe it, mother [10 p 467].

In the last act, when Lord Illingworth proposes to offer their son part of his fortune, Rachel Arbuthnot refuses again, although such refusal will leave Gerald without any financial independence in the future. Gerald is thus symbolically emasculated by the possessive love of his mother and of his fiancée, Hester, who may be regarded as another version of his mother. If in his childhood and adolescence, he depended only on his mother, from now on Gerald will depend on two women - his mother and Hester. Like all the male figures in the play (with the exception of lord Illingworth), Gerald's role is defined by his relationship to women - he is a son and a lover. However, unlike the other men, who enjoy some autonomy, Gerald is dominated by the two women in his life to such an extent that in the end he becomes completely disoriented and confused and does not know what to do. The question he asks Hester repeatedly - "Hester, Hester, what shall I do?" [10 p476] - points to his confusion and makes him a childish, even baby figure not very much different from the title woman in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

Although these two society comedies were very well received by the public, many critics of the time regarded them as an offspring of earlier

dramas. As Powell notes, one of the reviewers of *Lady Windermere's Fan* argued that "[h]alf a dozen plays have been made to pay toll in entrance to its plot" [12 p14]. He also points out that in a newspaper interview of the time the popular dramatist Sydney Grundy claimed that he could not stage a revival of his play *The Glass of Fashion* because "Mr. Oscar Wilde did so under the title of *Lady Windermere's Fan*"[12 p14]. The plots of the two plays bear some similarities, in that they both concern a married young woman who has been abandoned in infancy by the mother; moreover, in both plays the husband tries to conceal from the wife the identity of the long-lost mother, believed to be dead. Certain theatrical devices - the screen scene, inherited from Restoration comedy and the incriminating object left behind (a glove or a fan) are also common to both plays. *The Idler* by C. Haddon Chambers was another play *Lady Windermere's Fan* bore resemblance to. In both plays a young woman visits the rooms of a man who wants to run away with her; moreover, both in *The Idler* and in *Lady Windermere's Fan* the husband appears in these rooms at the critical moment and the wife hides behind a curtain, leaving behind a fan.

A Woman of No Importance reiterates partly some of the motifs found in *Lady Windermere's Fan:* the 'guilty secret' of the 'woman with a past', the double standard, the conflict between the puritans and the dandy. At the same time, the play reveals connections with the theatrical environment of French and English drama, particularly with *Le fils naturel* by Dumas as far as character types and dramatic situations are concerned: the fallen woman, the wicked aristocrat, the illegitimate child who meets his father for the first time and learns the truth about him. In both plays the son wants to see his parents reunited after learning who the father is; in Dumas' play, as well as in Wilde's the son marries a young wealthy woman and builds up a family from which the wicked father is excluded. The play also bears resemblance with Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* as far as character's names and focus on Puritan beliefs are concerned. Thus, Hester Worsley, who shares her Christian name with Hawthorne's heroine, comes from America and shares the rigid beliefs and values of the Boston Puritan community. Rachel Arbuthnot's name starts with the letter A, the same letter that represented Hawthorne's heroine mark of guilt and shame. Both Rachel and Hester Prynne live in obscurity and tend to the seek as a consequence of their 'fall.' The two women fight to keep their child. Lord Illingworth's surname name bears close resemblance to Chillingworth in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and so does his first name: George (in Wilde's play) and Roger (in Hawthorne's novel) are composed of the same letters.

6. Dismantling the arguments against

In spite of the resemblances to other literary productions of the period, Wilde's plays are not mere imitations.

As regards *Lady Windermere's Fan*, we could say that Grundy was right in believing that Wilde's play resembled his own, but he was wrong in charging Wilde of plagiarism. Grundy's *Glass of Fashion*, as well as Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* exploit the fallen woman, vagrant mother and abandoned child motifs. Some of these plays focused mostly on the mother (*East Lynne*), others on the abandoned child (*The Glass of Fashion)*, while still others gave similar importance to the vagrant mother and the daughter (*Lady Windermere's Fan, Odette*).

In most of these plays, leaving one's husband and child is seen as a terrible mistake which has to be expiated by the 'fallen woman' usually by illness, death or banishment. Although in the first part of the play Wilde apparently observes the pattern of the fallen woman/vagrant mother, Mrs. Erlynne escapes retribution and she is also awarded a big prize: she will marry Lord Augustus Lorton and will pass from the stage with wealth and a title before her instead of retreating into a convent. Moreover, the last line of the play, spoken by the daughter, describes her as "a very good woman" [6 p 430]. This description is echoed in the subtitle of Wilde's play *A Good Woman*, which, as Alan Birds notes, emphasises a redefinition of morality similar to Hardy's in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, subtitled *A Pure Woman.* [9 p113] In Wilde's time there were critics who expressed their bewilderment at Mrs. Erlynne's behaviour which departed from that of habitual stock characters. Clement Scott, for example, was shocked that Mrs. Erlynne should "leave forever her daughter unkissed" [13]. Scott's comment proves that in the public opinion of the time any woman, even a 'fallen woman' like Mrs. Erlynne should behave like a sacrificial motherly mother once she was reunited with her long-lost child.

While indebted to French plays through the motif of the wicked aristocrat and the illegitimate child, unlike the French models, *A Woman of No Importance* focused more on the woman and the depraved aristocrat, rather than on the child. In English dramas dealing with this motif both the seducer and the seduced get severe penalties. Even when the author sympathizes with her plight, as in the case of Hardy's 'pure woman', Tess d'Urbervilles, the 'woman with a past' cannot avoid final punishment. Unlike other authors, Wilde chooses to let the woman escape unpunished by others than herself; moreover, he makes her a virtuous, pious woman, the 'good woman' of the play. The wicked aristocrat, on the other hand, receives a symbolic punishment: not only is his marriage proposal turned down, but he

is also slapped across the face with his own glove by the woman he had wronged years ago.

The ideas above show that Wilde used conventions of dramatic development, as well as traditional genre roles and stereotypes and turned them to suit his own purpose. By doing that he questioned the traditional doctrine of the 'separation of spheres' and showed the frailty of traditional ideas about gender and common literary gender stereotypes.

7. Conclusions

This purpose of this study was to show how Wilde exploited conventional gender roles and stereotypes in two of his society comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, by playing the double game of conforming to and at the same time departing from expected conventions.

The article argued that, while using the patterns of the 'fallen woman' and the 'self-sacrificial mother', Wilde questioned the validity of the single meaning they had been attributed and disclosed their ambivalence. Mrs. Erlynne is a 'woman with a past', a vagrant mother who left her husband and child for a lover, but she is also a one-time sacrificial mother and a 'good woman', as described by her own daughter. Instead of being punished for her past sins, she gets a high prize in the end: a well-to-do husband and wealth. As Katherine Worth points out,

Wilde has made of her something new… through this character Wilde made his first telling criticism of the strange, hypocritical society which created the concept of the 'woman with a past' [8 p97].

Mrs. Arbuthnot, another woman with a past and a guilty secret proves to be a most pious and virtuous mother; however this sacrificial mother cannot let her son go and cuts all prospects of his future career due to her possessive, devouring love.

As Russel Jackson and Ian Small point out, ...the most rewarding approach to these plays is to embrace these ambiguities and to see in them some early modernist experimentation. They are the work of an author who enjoyed discords more than resolutions, who liked to tease his audiences with the denial of their habitual assumptions regarding character and motivation, who liked to undermine the conventional significance of formal devices [14 pxxxvi].

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