



UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Centro de Estudios de Postgrado

Master's Dissertation/

OSCAR WILDE'S FEMININE WORLD

Student: Ortega Román, Ana.

Tutor: Dr. Luciano García García

Dpt.: English Philology

November, 2016.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	p. 3
1. THE NOVEL.....	p. 4
1.1. The Picture of Dorian Gray.....	p. 4
2. THE THEATRE.....	p.13
2.1. A Woman of No Importance.....	p. 13
2.2. An Ideal Husband.....	p. 19
2.3. Lady Windermere's Fan	p. 24
2.4. The Importance of Being Earnest.....	p. 27
2.5. Salome.....	p. 30
2.6. The Duchess of Padua; Vera	p. 30
3. WILDE'S WOMEN.....	p.31
4. CONCLUSION.....	p. 32
5. REFERENCES.....	p.34

INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century male European writing is somehow identified with the feminine world and from a diversity of angles gender norms began to be protested and reshaped. It is a feminization of literature which has to do with a ‘‘destabilization of traditional models of male bourgeois identity’’ as Rita Felski (1991: 1094) poses it. One of the results will be an elaborate array of contradictions among the structures of gender in which we will witness, in a single work, examples of completely opposite gender models.

Oscar Wilde’s (1854- 1900) attitude towards women and feminism in his life and work has been a source of contention (Davies, 2015: 170). As Madden (2015: 9) poses it, the writer was capable of existing and writing outside of patriarchal discourse. There are many evidences however which prove how gender identities, as said above, were being reconstituted during the period. In this sense we are going to analyze the characters of strong and deeply independent woman who are even active in the public sphere (Sybil or Vera) or unconventional or deviant woman with a rooted moral code who distance themselves from the standard norms (Mrs. Arbuthnot or Mrs. Erlynne). As Li and Yi (2015: 1021) state, the women characters in Wilde’s books turned out to be different from what people generally accepted; ‘‘they are independent, brave and strong in mind’’ assure Li and Yi (2015: 1021) who also comment on how the author attaches what he thought to be the merits to males to his favourite female characters.

The political context in which this feminization of male avant-garde texts should be included is one of increasing feminist movements in several European countries. Oscar Wilde was said to have stood on the waves of feminism as his perspectives on females were most of the time advanced. Women were beginning to ask fiercely for their rights and they wanted access to the public life, there was therefore a growing urgency of feminist demands. In fact Oscar Wilde’s mother and his wife joined in many social activities of this kind which were sure to put some impact on him.

According to Li and Yi (2015: 1020) women figures such as Mable Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, Ms. Padua in *The Duchess of Padua*, Vera in *Vera* or Sybil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* all represented the wave of feminism in the sense that they all broke the social customs and strived for independence in marriage. Kerry Powell (2009: 123) views some of the most relevant plays by Wilde as ‘‘his compromise with an increasingly powerful variety of late-Victorian feminism that demanded the standards of feminine purity be applied to men as well

as to women. `` However, it is widely thought that this admirable undertaking of the writer would ironically help bring about the author's downfall.

In my paper I am going to study some of the most important works by Oscar Wilde: I am going to deal with his novel and his theatrical production. In each of the compositions I am going to research in detail the feminine world: from the depiction of women characters, the ideals about women that the characters present (which may or nor reflect the author's own ideas) to the diverse gender roles. It is in fact significant how many of the political or ideological conceptions of the writer are expressed and verbalized through the feminine characters who are then the vehicle of the author's deeper convictions.

Related to the feminine universe, there is a figure which all the works I have studied have in common: the aesthete or the dandy. It is through this personage that the author's gender awareness is exhibited many times too. Lord Henry Wotton, Lord Illington, Lord Goring or Lord Darlington are some the dandified characters I am writing about. It is in their voices that great part of the commentaries on ladies are pronounced and through their several aphorisms we learn a particular philosophy about women. As Felski (1991: 1100) explains, the dandy expresses an elitist disdain for the non-intellectual majority in which women are included. Women are seen as ``symbols of the democratizing vulgarity of modern life [...] ``, they are not able to reach the required intellectual mobility, irony and aesthetic sophistication. Their influence then is perceived a contaminant for the elevated man/artist and they are directly related with vulgarity. We will observe this hierarchization in all the books studied in this essay in which the dandies will produce a series of misogynists remarks intended to create opposition between genders.

As a consequence we are going to study how the appeal to the feminine in late nineteen century entails a fundamental ambiguity; apart from the above mentioned reshaping of gender roles there is a recurrent identification of woman with vulgarity and corporeality which will be used by the male aesthete to create a direct opposition with himself.

1. THE NOVEL

1.1.The Picture of Dorian Gray.

This work is exemplary of 'Decadent' and 'Aesthetic' trends in the English *fin de siècle*, a term used in connection to the 1890s and related to 'sexual anarchy' with new ideas rising and confronting old ones. It is Oscar Wilde's only novel and it exemplifies many of the notions about gender which are under study. In fact, as Ledger (2007: 6) points out it, there was a

discursive and aesthetic resonance between 'Aestheticism', the 'Decadence' and the New Women writing and ideas. It was at the end of the nineteenth century that numerous novels and short stories by and about 'advanced' women were not only published but also highly publicized and popular.

The terms 'Decadent' and 'Aesthete' were being used at the end of the century to refer to almost any artwork that displayed innovations in aesthetic, philosophy, subject or style. On the one hand, 'Aestheticism' was defined by the phrase: 'art for art's sake', therefore separating art from any moral considerations. On the other hand, 'Decadence' rejected some westerns culture's views such as the middle class family mode and it believed in the superiority of art over nature. Aalto (2010: 4) argues that Oscar Wilde did not strictly conformed to 'Aestheticism' because although the idea that art as a moral guidance was dismissed by the author he still believed that art is shaped somehow by one's morals. However, it is true that in relation to the 'Decadent' doctrine 'he seemed more faithful to the Decadent's rejection of objective reality.'` (Aalto, 2010: 5)

To begin with, Wilde's depiction of the character of Lord Henry's wife is quite meaningful from a feminine viewpoint; from the very beginning she makes it clear (when she introduces herself) that *'It is only his wife'* providing the reader with a significant introduction to one of the few women of the novel. She is the presented as a pathetic figure, both outside and inside, who leaves a lot to be desired in relation to the complexities of her husband. Besides, Victoria, which is the name of the woman, mentions the fact that she always learns from her husband's ideas by means of his friends, which brings to light the lack of communication between the couple. This particular example has drawn my attention since it is precisely for his wit in conversation that Lord Henry is most appreciated but it seems that the thing changes when related to his wife.

In fact, the inclusion of the character of Victoria serves mainly to manifest one of Lord Henry's concepts of women: *'Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious: both are disappointed'*. We will deal with the dandy's assumptions on marriage later on in this section. He indeed advised Dorian not to marry with strongly sentimental women and Dorian answers that he is too much in love to get married; it is the first time in the novel that he mentions the name or another feminine figure in the book: Sibyl Vane.

At this precise moment, a misogynist discourse on women by Lord Henry's appears in the narrative: *'Women are a decorative sex'* assures the gentleman; a quite provocative statement

to open his dissertation. He presents women as plain beings only valid because of their physical charming. He alludes to the superficial nature of women when he divides them into two categories: '*the plain and the coloured*'. He also criticizes the feminine obsession with pretending to look younger, a leitmotif of the novel. Finally, he refers to just five women in London with whom it is worth to have a decent conversation; here, he suggests that two of these ladies may be prostitutes. At this point, the reader may feel like Dorian when he comments that Lord Henry's ideas terrify him. Felski (1991: 1100), as already commented in the introduction of my paper, would illustrate this particular point in this way: "the dandy, in pursuit of uniqueness through the narcissistic cult of self, sees women as exemplifying the uniformity and standardization of modern life that he most abhors."

Chapter VI, when Dorian tells his friends Lord Henry and Hallward that he is engaged to Sybil, shows again Lord Henry's vision of marriage; the man points out that '*as for marriage, of course that would be silly, but there are other and more interesting bonds between men and women*'. When Dorian tells them how the proposal was carried out, Harry answers that it is always women who are concerned about marriage, not men. It has been argued that there is no shortage of married people or opinions on marriage in Wilde's works; with the relative idleness of the upper classes, marriage is one of the few things they take an interest in. The dominant view in Wilde is one marked by the triviality and facetiousness characteristic of the dandies in which the only valuable thing about the institution is the legitimacy it grants.

We continue examining how each romantic remark by Dorian is followed by a harsh comment by Harry. For instance, they are talking about pleasure and Dorian says that it consists on adoring someone. Harry answers that being adored is a nuisance and that women constantly adore men and bother them with useless requirements. He is quite explicit when he comments that: '*women [...] inspire us with the desire to do masterpieces, and always prevent us from carrying them out.*' This notion of women who deprive men from freedom and personal fulfilment is recurrent through the novel.

On the other hand, when young Dorian confesses that Sybil Vane '*is everything to me in life*' we can appreciate a conventional vision of romantic love and women. The young lady is in fact described in terms of courtly love: her face like a flower, eyes like '*violet wells of passion*', lips like roses and an amazing voice; also, he assures that she is sacred and divine. Summing up she is '*the loveliest thing that I had ever seen in my life*', the captivated Dorian states.

A linguistic approach to the passages describing young Sybil has been carried out by Yingyi Li and Li Yi (2015: 1021) who counted up to fifteen adjectives to account for the beautiful actress. The use of those classifying adjectives contrasts with the description of other male characters such as Dorian Gray. Also, it is said that for women characters the author preferred to use metaphors, especially the structure 'XX-like' and he rarely used the exact words to show the precise appearance of any women. Mostly, he attributed different types of flowers to different types of women: when Sybil was dancing she was like '*a swaying plant in water*', her face was flower-like and her eyes were full of the passion of '*violet*'; also she was like a white rose in the silver, which was used to describe Salome too. As for other works Mable Chiltern is thought to be an apple-blossom and the antagonist Ms. Cheverly was regarded as a violet orchid (the color violet implying the meaning of passion). One may argue that that standard conception of women contrasts with the above mentioned ideas about the feminine world by Lord Henry. We can assume then that at the beginning of the novel both characters, Dorian and Lord Henry, differ significantly in their approaches to women and love but we are going to find out that their positions become closer as the novel develops and Dorian's degradation advances.

In fact, another contrast that is established in this chapter IV is made by Dorian when he talks about other kind of women: '*ordinary women*', that is to say, women who are not actresses. He says that there is no interest in them at all, that they are plain and predictable, in other words, they are similar to the kind of women described by his friend Lord Henry. In that sense, both men share the same opinion on women except for the existence of a magic creature: Sybil Vane.

Kerry Powell (1997: 181) states that Victorian actresses were often represented as suffering or wounded and above all they were depicted as opposed to conventional Victorian women. Whereas the domestic regular woman was supposed to have a passive and homelike role, actresses raised their voices on the stage in front of a recipient male audience. This reversal of the established roles allowed women to be more present in public life but it also made it difficult the reconciliation with the domestic life. As Powell (1997: 187) points out it represented'' the idea of an unbridgeable gap between women performers on one hand and wives and mothers on the other. ``

In *The Picture* we can observe this rule which sets actresses apart from other standard women. Wilde contrasts Sybil with the rest of the feminine figures, whose lives are predictable and superficial: '*But an actress! How different an actress is!*' says Dorian Gray. Powell (1997: 187) poses it in this way ``actresses rise above the superficial chatter, shallow thought and empty

days of what the novel regards as conventional woman.” However, as explained above, the young lady is unable to combine a career on stage with a happy domestic life; like so many actresses in so many Victorian texts, she is written out of love and marriage. Wilde’s text therefore depicts the performing woman, as the majority of Victorian writings, as being outside the boundaries of gender in many senses.

The impetuosity of Dorian’s passion who utters such commentaries as *‘I get hungry for her presence’* or *‘I must take her love me’* is something to consider too. The young man has fallen in love very deeply in just three weeks with a woman he has barely spoken to. He just knows intuitively Sybil’s soul and he admits that he is afraid.

However, contrary to the reader’s expectations, in Chapter VII we read about the end of Dorian’s passion for Sybil. It seems that what soon begins, it is over soon as well. However, before this, there are still references to the lady in terms of courtly love. When she enters the scene she is described in this way:

‘Her body swayed, while she danced, as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. Her hands seemed to be made of cool ivory’.

Nevertheless, the beauty of this portrayal contrasts with the subsequent acting of the young lady. Despite all the expectations Dorian had created in his friends (*‘then the curtain rises, and you will see the girl to whom I am going to give all my life’*), the lady’s performance turns to be a disaster. Sybil explains the reasons of her failure to an incredulous Dorian: it seems that once she is so deeply in love she cannot mimic this passion anymore because she is experimenting it in her real life. *‘I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire’*, the lady argues. She loses all interest in her acting, which she now describes as false and illusory and she “reverts to a sentimental aesthetic of romantic love grounded in an ingenuous belief in the authentic subject” as stated by Felski (1991: 1003). For her, Dorian is *‘more than all art can ever be’*, just the opposite of Dorian’s feelings for her, since as he points out: *‘without your art you are nothing’*.

Consequently the young man abandons her due to her fiasco in the play leaving her completely devastated and providing a melodramatic conclusion. It seems that one of Lord Henry’s theories about the supremacy of beauty over sentiments (i.e. ‘Aestheticism’) has been put into practice by Dorian, despite the fact that he wanted to get away from his depraved influence. In fact, once he is at home, he feels remorse for his behavior, but immediately he comes back to one of Lord Henry’s assumptions about women: that they are better prepared to bear pain than men and that

they only lived on their emotions. The male aesthete thus explicitly defines his identity in opposition to all womanly inclinations to sentimental excess. He says that women choose their partner just to have reasons to create a scandal. All these conceptions, inspired by Harry, separate the two young teenagers creating an inscrutable distance between them.

Nevertheless, Dorian's last resolution is to come back to Sybil to lead a '*beautiful and pure*' life and to get rid of Lord Henry's influence, in other words he '*would resist temptation*'. However, in chapter VIII Dorian learns from Harry that Sybil has committed suicide. As the young man is remorseful Harry will try to make him feel better with a display of his theories about love, art and women. Concerning women, which are our object of study here, he assures that Dorian would have been unhappy if he had married Sybil because she would have been responsible of his lack of interest in life. He argues that when women realize that their couples are no longer interested in them, something that always happens, they become obsessed with their appearance or become unfaithful. The gentleman alludes also to the good memory of women, who, he thinks, are very fond of bringing back the memories of the romances. He qualifies that as '*an utter intellectual stagnation*' because '*details are always vulgar*.'

Lord Henry continues his discourse on women when he affirms that they are not able to differentiate when a relationship has finished, they always want to continue the *affair*, to enlarge it as much as possible. He is quite cynical when he assures that '*not one of the women I have known would have done for me what Sybil Vane did for you*'. He is then presenting the lady's suicide as something positive for Dorian which again brings to light the gentleman's lack of morality. It is not surprising that, with such a persuasive speech, Dorian is little by little relieved from his guilt and he feels at peace with himself.

Another point of Harry's dissertation about women lies in the '*consolations that women find in modern life*'. Here, the relation he establishes between the condition of women and the colors they wear may sound absurd. In fact, the gentleman's theories most of the time are able to impact because they look senseless. With this character, many times it is not what he says but the ways he says it; Harry is so charming and appealing that it does not matter whether he utters a pointless statement because it will be beautifully uttered. Another consolation would then be boasting about marital happiness; also, religion would provide another means to console themselves and the last one would be '*taking someone else's admirer when one loses one's own*.'

Moreover, in an attempt to cheer Dorian up Harry makes the most misogynist point when he asserts that '*women appreciate cruelty*'. His patriarchal discourse maintains that men have emancipated women but they prefer being subdued to their yoke; it is a chosen slavery, according to Lord Henry, since '*they love being dominated.*' It is this particular talk one of the most sexist and explicitly chauvinist of the entire novel and it has special relevance framed in the context of Sibyl's suicide. After such persuasive arguments young Dorian is absolutely convinced not only that it has not been his fault but also that '*it has been a marvelous experience*'. He even wonders if life has prepared something similarly beautiful for him in the future.

In chapter XV we can still read some of Harry's remarks on women and on marriage in the same terms than in his previous interventions. In that sense he assures that the condition for a man to be happy in marriage is not being in love with his wife. He also affirms that when a woman marries a second time it is because she hated her husband but if a man does so it is because he loved his first wife. As always, he is continuously highlighting the differences between sexes, always of course in favor of men. When involved in a second wedding '*women try their luck; men risk theirs*', he assures.

Much like the New Woman we have already talked about before, the dandy also questioned culturally assigned gender roles. Perhaps this is why the figure of the dandy is such a prominent one in Wilde's works (the majority of Wilde's main male characters are dandies in fact). The dandy is closely associated to the 'Aesthetic' and 'Decadent' sentiments, a bond related to the appreciation of beauty and art over any naturalized notion of acceptable behavior. The dandy cultivated a lifestyle that was characterized by conspicuous idleness and their greatest aim was the perfection of the pose of exquisiteness. (Aalto, 2010: 27)

As Lord Henry represents the figure of the aesthete he can be said to be, in fact, a feminized male protagonist. According to Felski (1991: 1095), the aesthete's feminized status is appreciated in his "passivity, languidness, vanity, hypersensitivity, a love of fashion and ornamentation" which are traditionally feminine traits. Madden (2015: 9) also talked about "the effeminate tendencies of Wilde's dandies" when he was examining sexual and gender identity mutability. For instance, Lord Henry, as the conventional Victorian woman, devotes himself to the cultivation of style in an interior and private space rather than to public life. This 'effemination' of the male members is also explicit in Dorian, Harry's best disciple, who also becomes very fond of collecting beautiful objects therefore locating his pleasure in

consumption. However, if the aesthete shares with women an identity as a consumer, it becomes imperative for him to signal the superior taste and the qualitative difference of his own aesthetic response.

Nevertheless, Aalto (2010: 29) assures that since an aristocrat was expected to display effeminacy, the dandy's mannerisms would not have been evidence of same-sex passion. The Wildean dandy was therefore exonerated from suspicious, in other words, dandy effeminacy was a signifier of class distinction rather than of sexual choices.

Finally, Felski (1991: 1096) assures that both Dorian and Harry can be perceived as quite useless figures since the exaltation of appearance over essence, decoration over function is a doctrine which is opposite to the prevailing bourgeois values that associate masculinity with rationality, industry and utility. In fact, there were contemporary reviewers who criticize this book for its unmanliness whereas for some others it was a positive and refined feature which adds beauty and sophistication to the text.

If it can be argued that Sybil Vane is the first sympathetic feminine character in the play in this chapter another quite positive feminine figure emerges: Lady Narborough. To begin with, she is described as an intelligent lady, something uncommon in Wilde when dealing with women who are many times shown as indifferent, hypocritical and oversensitive. It is significant how it is said that Harry characterizes her '*as the remains of really remarkable ugliness*' as if the gentleman could not bear that smart woman also existed and had to criticize whatever feature on her. In fact, Harry goes on with his accustomed misogynist comments on women in this chapter when he says that the duchess is '*very clever, too clever for a woman.*'

However, it is at least curious how one of the few women that the author deals with benevolence in the novel presents many similarities with the most chauvinist character par excellence: Lord Henry. She is also cynical in her observations and certain cruelty can be also be interpreted from her words. When talking about her husband she says that he was '*dreadfully short-sighted, and there is no pleasure in taking in a husband who never sees anything.*' There are more examples of such Harry-like utterances on the lady as when she tells Dorian in private about her daughter and the kind of life she leads in the countryside. Lady Narborough speaks about her family in pejorative terms implying that their life far from her is pointless and bored. She concludes persuading Dorian to sit next to her, avoiding her tedious family, to have fun. Besides, the lady likes playing on words by constructing paradoxes exactly as Harry constantly does: '*Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married*

men.’ One may conclude that Wilde’s conception of intelligence is linked to Lord Henry’s style consisting on paradoxical and sometimes cruel epigrams about universal truths. In the novel we see other characters employing this particular attitude such as Dorian Gray, who is explicitly learning this pose from Harry and in this chapter Lady Narborough, who is one of the few clever women in the book.

To conclude with this character, it is remarkable how she, although similar to the gentleman in some aspects, confronts Harry’s prejudices on women: Harry states that women love men because of their defects and *‘If we have enough of them they will forgive us for everything, even our intellects.’* Lady Narborough replies that if women did not love men because of their defects, no man would ever get married, implying that men are full of imperfections. I wanted to comment on this passage because it is in reality almost the only feminine extract in the whole novel and, as said above, it is relevant that it is pronounced by a character so similar to Harry.

Another interesting feminine character is Duchess Gladys. As Henry points out *‘her clever tongue gets on one’s nerves.’* She is in fact able to follow with audacity the excessive rhythm of Harry’s conversation as we can read several times in chapter XVII. For instance this well-known dialogue shows how the young lady is an excellent partner for Harry’s wit:

‘What of art? She asked.

It is a malady.

Love?

An illusion.

Religion?

The fashionable substitute for Belief.

You are a sceptic.

Never! Scepticism is the beginning of Faith.

What are you.

To define is to limit.’

This famous passage summarizes the essence of Harry’s genius as it the highest paradox: he has been all the time providing definitions for the concepts the Duchess suggested and when he is asked about himself, he concludes with that precise epigram about limiting. Each time there is a conversation with this lady it is a quite fluent one and it seems that the gentleman has found an interlocutor at his level.

Apart from being an outstanding conversational partner Gladys's discourse is also significant from a feminist point of view. '*Women rule the world*' pronounces the quick-witted lady in front of a delighted Harry. She considers that women cannot bear mediocrities and that men are more preoccupied for the appearances than women. It is the opposite of Harry's opinion on the subject, who thinks that '*a woman will flirt with anybody in the world as long as other people are looking on.*' Gladys also mentions that courage is now a feminine trait (before it was a quality of men) and defies Henry by describing women: '*Sphinxes without secrets.*'

Yingyi Li and Li Yi (201: 1023) comment that readers usually can get knowledge of women characters through the eyes and words of men characters therefore it is the male figure who introduces the feminine part. For example, Sybil's charming personality is not shown by the lady herself but through Dorian's sight. Moreover, in Chapter III there is a big party where many aristocratic and middle-class women are introduced from the sight of Lord Henry.

2. THE THEATRE.

2.1. A Woman of No Importance.

To begin with and according to Kerry Powell (2009: 123) in his book *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde* this work evolves from an ideological engagement with feminism to a reasoned combination of gender identity. I have already written about this duality in the introduction of this essay but it is in this play where this polarity becomes more explicit.

The play opens with Lady Caroline and Miss Worsley gossiping about the different guests that Lady Hunstanton has selected for a party. The American puritan Hester (Miss Worsley) represents the simple and the pure while the English leisure class society seems mainly based on appearances and affectation. The two women go over each one of the guests commenting in detail on different private aspects. Therefore, the first impression on women the reader may observe is that they are incurable gossip. It is in fact the host of the party, Lady Hunstanton, the one who most of the time indulges in petty talk during the play.

Quesada (2001: 7 and 8) affirms that women in Wilde's plays carry out a dialogue which communicates nothing at all; they therefore talk a lot without saying anything. This device was thought to expose the lack of communication in Victorian society, especially among the upper classes. Quesada states that in Wilde's plays when women talk, everybody stops to listen to them despite the fact they have nothing to say.

Since Miss Worsley comes from America, a vivid debate begins on America versus England. After Hester praises Mr. Arbuthnot for having a pure nature, Lady Caroline replies that in England it is not a good habit for a woman to talk about men in similar terms; for her, friendship between different sexes is virtually impossible. '*English women conceal their feelings till after they are married*' points out Lady Caroline. This distinction between American and English women has already been dealt with in *The Picture* in a conversation between Lord Henry and Lord Fermor that reads thus:

'American girls are as clever at concealing their parents, as English women are at concealing their past.' [...] 'Is she pretty?' 'She behaves as if she was beautiful. . Most American women do. It is the secret of their charm.'

In this play Lord Illingworth will pronounce exactly the same first sentence when referring to Miss Worsley. Furthermore, in relation to their beauty, American women are famous for their elegance as it is referred in *The Picture* and in this play: '*All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris*' says Lady Hunstanton (and the same can be read in Wilde's novel). Moreover, Lady Caroline assures that American women end up with all the good matches and that they should stay in their country.

Later on Mrs. Allonby and Lady Stutfield enter into scene; they are talking about a woman who eloped with a gentleman. Another character, Lady Caroline considers that young women do enjoy '*playing with fire*' and Mrs. Allonby replies that if you know how to play you won't get burned. Lady Caroline's traditional views are in direct contrast with Mrs. Allonby who has a bit of a reputation for controversy. When Lady Stutfield states that the world has been made for men and not for women, Mrs. Allonby's reply is again significant from a feminist viewpoint: she asserts that it is much the better for women because for them there are more things that are forbidden for them. This paradox reminds us of Lord Henry's discourses in *The Picture* and as we know this contradictory feature is characteristic of Wilde's prose. Antagonistic remarks are then proper to that singular lady, who, for instance, states that men show their vanity when they want to be a woman's first love but what women do want is to be their last romance.

As a consequence, we can assume that Mrs. Allonby is not the stereotypical female character and indeed she can be considered as a female dandy. We can affirm that because, among other things, she is quite capable of holding her own when it comes to verbal sparring with her male counterparts. In fact, she presents similarities with Lord Illingworth since both share a resembling witty and moral outlook. In Raby's (1997: 149) words: they are 'dandies who

dominate by wit and assurance, who match each other in their manipulation of words, and who define the fashionable and the modern.'' These two particular characters exchange witty repartee at the end of Act I where we can read extensively about the feminine condition.

They begin their fluent conversation talking paradoxically about plain and beautiful women. This leads them to talk about marriage, a recurrent topic in Wilde's plays, as it has been mentioned; the gentleman is presumably against this institution and he also assures that the feminine sense of humor will spoil every romance. Aalto (2010: 3) comments that legitimacy, eligibility for marriage and society's expectations for married life are all prominent issues in Wilde's plays and in ''the typical manner of comedies, the plays employ marriage as a plot device that neatly wraps up the story.''

Then, they start a conversation about the young American, Miss Worsley. As Mrs. Allonby is displeased because she is too young, Lord Illingworth consoles her by affirming that one cannot trust a woman who tells her real age because if she says so, she '*would tell one anything*.' The discussion goes on now debating about bad men and women; Mrs. Allonby assures that men never get tired of '*bad women*' and the gentleman, when asked, defines women as '*sphinxes without secrets*', the exact words employed by Lord Henry in *The Picture*. This means that women's enigmatic aura is purely superficial and they exemplify conventionality ''without aesthetic self-consciousness'' (Felski, 1991: 1104). Then, Miss Worsley's puritanism enters the conversation and Lord Illingworth, ironically, states that '*I don't think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her*' implying that women are so fond of physical pleasures as men.

Raby (1997: 148) argues that the most disturbing portrait within the play is that of Lord Illingworth. Wilde explicitly described him in these terms: '*He is certainly not natural. He is a figure of art. Indeed, if you can bear the truth, he is myself*.' Lord Illingworth's indecent and sexist witticisms are present continuously in the play. We have analyzed some examples but I am going to deal in detail with many other instances. At the end of Act I he says referring to Mrs. Arbuthnot: '*what a typical woman you are! You talk sentimentally, and you are thoroughly selfish the whole time*.' Later, he talks extensively with his son, Gerarld, and one of the main topics is the feminine nature. Lord Illingworth begins the discourse assuring that good women have a very limited view of life. Then he gives young Gerarld advice about the condition of women in general; he affirms that '*women rule society*' and that it is always a good idea to be in good terms with them to be part of that society. He warns him about trying to understand

women and points out that '*women represent the triumph of matter over mind*'. He also asserts that women exercise a tyranny on men, '*the tyranny of the weak over the strong*.' Other indelicacies include that one can't be happy when married or that women should not have memory which is '*the beginning of dowdiness*.'

There is another passage in this first Act which is worth mentioning which concerns the role of women in public life. Lady Caroline asks Mr. Kelvil, a modern progressive moralist, if he is in favour of women in politics. He answers that it is reassuring that women are more and more implied in the political life because, among other things, they contribute with their elevated morality. Lady Hunstanton supports this assertion but she is afraid '*that dear Lord Illingworth doesn't value the moral qualities in women as much as he should*.' As it has been suggested above this character can be read as the counterpart of Lord Henry in *The Picture* and this utterance, as the others we have deeply analyzed above, is one of the examples that prove it.

Mr. Kelvil is so favorable to the feminine presence in public life because they may guarantee tradition; therefore, when he talks about morality he may be referring to the conventional principles that should sustain politics in England at the end of the XIX century. This reference must be understood in the awakening of the suffragist movement when women are beginning to claim for an active participation in the political sphere.

Later on, Lord Kelvil reaffirms his position in relation to women when he assures that '*woman is the intellectual helpmeet of man in public as in private life*', an statement contrary to Lord Illingworth's view on women, who, according to Kelvil, considers women as a toy. All this must be understood in a context little by little more favorable for women's rights. In fact, as Pope (2008: 4) explains, the position of women had been bolstered by a raft of legislative measures which eventually would make them independent of their husbands. Pope argues that ''although far from having achieved equal status, the *fin de siècle* woman was no longer completely subsumed into the identity of her husband, or indeed necessarily obliged to find one.''

Act II opens with a new controversy between the traditional role of women and a more open-minded attitude. Lady Caroline, as it was said above, represents a more conventional point of view; she considers that men's '*proper place*' is '*looking after their wives*' and what is relevant here is that she uses the word '*property*' to refer to married women. When Mrs. Allonby hears that she immediately reacts stating that we are not '*other people's property*', or in other words, '*we don't belong to anyone*'. It is interesting how Mrs. Allonby represents the more indecent

side of women but also the most committed one from a feminist point of view. Contrariwise, Lady Caroline sticks to old customs and she defends with tooth and nail the institution of marriage, she then thinks that it is scandalous that there are so many single men. '*Femininity is the quality I admire most in women*', with statements like this Lady Caroline's conservative position is constantly reaffirmed in the play. Besides she assures that the failure of many marriages lies in the frivolity of some women and Mrs. Allonby replies that the main problem is men's common sense.

Davies (2015: 171) has suggested that at times, the Society Plays seem to suggest that women are, in short, their own worst enemy, and that they regularly oppress and condemn each other for personal gain. In other words, the interaction between women in these plays reveals most of the time tension and hostility.

However, I consider that at this point, Mrs. Allonby's discourse in a sense moves away from the feminist notion of equality since she defines women as irrational beings as opposed to men, she says that women are '*picturesque protests against the mere existence of common sense*.' I think that this can be interpreted as a defense of the emotional and passionate nature of women but it can also be argued that it is a sexist simplification to define women in these reductionist terms.

Moreover, another traditional character can be Lady Hunstanton who voices discriminatory statements like this one: '*I don't believe in women thinking too much. Women should think with moderation, as they should do all things in moderation*.'

Another interesting character who defends the feminine position is Miss Worsley, and she is said to embody some of Wilde's own opinions about his day. Her name Hester was deliberately chosen for its New England Puritan ring, echoing Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The lady presents very strong beliefs about the double standards towards scorned women and the men who impregnate them: '*Don't have one law for men and another for women*' says the young lady who also refers to the fact that men can deny their indiscretions whereas for women it is impossible. Aalto (2010: 20) will say that she is clearly against the angel-wife ideal that is based on the double pattern. Her point is that both men and women should be punished not just women. As Mrs. Arbuthnot, who has experienced this shame in first person, poses it '*the woman suffers. The man goes free*.' When Hester learns about Mrs. Arbuthnot's past, she will conclude her discourse by raising her voice in favour of the feminine community: '*in her all womanhood is martyred*' she claims, in an attempt to fraternise with the lady. Davies (2015:

184) will express that this vision of solidarity between women ‘‘speaks of the strength of women working together to overcome gendered prejudice.’’

This is one particular example of ways in which women in these plays can form connections to support each other in the face of patriarchal exploitation. As Davies (2015: 172) explains, there is a new focus for the potential meanings of bonds between women, in the shape of the New Woman, who fostered the feminist potential of bonds between women. Hester has proved then that female-female ties between women were central to women’s liberation as a group in the nineteenth century.

Both Mrs. Arbuthnot, Miss Worsley and to some extent Mrs. Allonby too were figures of strength an autonomy, and part of a growing political force already mentioned: the New Woman. Pope (2008: 4) will express that the thought that some women, for instance, might choose to pursue an alternative to marriage was both perplexing and horrifying to men.

To conclude with the analysis of this play a remarkable piece of women’s vindication is Mrs. Arbuthnot’s final speech on maternity. This character can be understood as being the centre of goodness and moral truth within the play, according to Raby (1997: 148). Although the emancipated New Woman was questioning her destiny of motherhood and taking control of her reproductive rights (Pope, 2008: 21) her first words are: ‘*Men don’t understand what mothers are*’; indeed, this seems to be true if we pay attention to Lord Illingworth’s attitude towards maternity: he says that mothers always bore him a lot and that women’s tragedy is that they become like their mothers. On the contrary, Mrs. Arbuthnot emphasizes the value of maternity over other experiences: ‘*I would rather be a mother-oh! Much rather!-than have been always pure*’ affirms the lady who delivers a very beautiful monologue on this life experience.

Raby (1997: 150) would argue that from the language of Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester a tension can be derived. Their expression of the new morality is sometimes conveyed in terms and rhythms which seem too heavily reminiscent of melodrama and the Bible to be aesthetically convincing. In relation to this kind of language, Ledger (2007: 6) explains that there was an irony in the fact that a number of New Women writers of the *fin de siècle* drew on vocabulary of late-nineteenth-century social purity feminism that was thoroughly antagonistic towards sexual avant-gardism.

2.2. An Ideal Husband.

In this section of the paper, I am going to begin with a brief analysis of the feminine characters of the play to show how the author has represented women in this particular work. Then, I am going to introduce also some masculine figures since they introduce feminine conceptions interesting to our subject of study too.

To begin with, Lady Gertrude Chiltern can be said to embody the New Victorian Woman in the sense that she is incorruptible, virtuous, cultivated and participates in her husband's political career. When she hears that Sir Robert has changed his mind and is going to support the Argentina Canal Scheme she, behaving as a moral absolutist, immediately condemns his attitude and convinces him to retract.

Standing as a foil to the earnest Lady Chiltern we find the witty and charismatic Mrs. Cheveley. This 'femme fatale' can be considered an opportunistic villainess who seeks inevitably fortune and power. She is a character with displays also elements of the New Woman and from the very beginning she voices many of the statements of the play referred to the feminine condition. In fact, she has a position at the Viennese Embassy and she is on the whole very self-sufficient. She is unmarried and she is in town for business. Besides, she professed to prefer books '*in yellow covers*', a reference to *The Yellow Book*, a journal produced by artists and writers of the 'Decadent' and 'Aestheticism' movement associated with the New Woman.

We will read how she talks about the inexplicable nature of women assuming at the same time the absolute importance of the physical appearance. Lord Goring, the dandified character of the play, refers to her as an intelligent women but Lady Chiltern, her antithesis, assures that '*I don't call women of that kind clever. I call them stupid.*' It seems that, as Aalto (2010: 17) poses it, ``the trade-off for her intelligence and independence is being morally reproachable. ``

According to Davies (2015: 178) there are many ways in which women might exercise a dangerous influence upon each other in Victorian literature. Mrs. Chiltern's condemnation of Mrs. Cheveley shows the potential for women to corrupt other women. For Gertrude, for instance, her own school environment provided Cheveley with opportunities for tainting her 'friends'.

This figure can also be considered the feminine counterpart of Lord Goring due to her witty repartee and her lack of moral principles. Another relevant statements support this particular claim; for instance, her frivolity becomes evident when she assures that a woman's first duty is to keep her dressmaker happy (and the second has not been discovered yet). This statement, according to Madden (2015: 11), reveals her understanding of the relationship between object-

representation and patriarchal ideology since the logical conclusion is that a woman's duty rests in the authority of men.

Later, the lady will lament this when she assures that the real tragedy for a woman is that her past is a lover and the future a husband. Here, Mrs. Cheveley puts the struggle which women in patriarchal systems face in very concrete terms: women are unable to escape their past and their future rests in the hands of a man they must align themselves for life. However, her own attitude will contradict this assumption since she asks Lord Goring for marriage later in the play. Contrariwise, she pronounces some statements in favour of women too: she points out that one of the difference between sexes is that women are not disarmed by compliments as men are. This affirmation implies that women are intellectually wise creatures who are able to resist the superficiality of excessive flattery.

As Felski (1991: 1095) explains, in early Romantic literature feminine characters are associated with an expressive aesthetics being restricted to the articulation of feeling. In the late nineteenth century we see how women are related to aestheticism, parody and a preoccupation with surface and style. This is the case of Mrs. Cheveley who in her comments displays an excessive concern with the external appearances and the same can be applied to other Wildean characters such as Mrs. Allonby and Mrs. Erlynne who we will study later in detail.

However, this new attention on style is not a concern restricted to women and at the end of the nineteenth century there is indeed a focus on appearances. Felski (1991: 1097) assures that "this insistence on the artificiality of the real can be read as a critical response to the presentation of bourgeois values and beliefs [...]"; middle class conceptions of reason, progress and masculinity are then rejected by this new aestheticism.

Related to the issue of the competition between women, in this play Mrs. Cheveley raises suspicion of attractiveness. The generalized resentment which is displayed, both in Mabel Chiltern first as in Lady Basil don and Mrs. Marchmont later, indicates the ways in which the pitting of women against each other becomes internalized and thus habitual. (Davies, 2015: 176)

As for the imagery of the play, the diamond snake bracelet which Mrs. Cheveley stole from Lord Goring's cousin seems to represent the Lady's past (Madden, 2015: 12). In fact, her position as a woman in a patriarchal society is what traps her and her failed attempts at blackmail are failed attempts to escape. We can read how her threats need evidence (the letter) to be taken seriously whereas Lord Goring's do not. The power he derives from a patriarchal

society means that his word alone is ideologically powerful enough to trap her. (Madden, 2015: 12).

In this outstanding play many of the generalizations about women are voiced nevertheless by such an irreverent character as Lord Goring, and the majority of them present a similar moral outlook. At the beginning of Act II he highlights the great instinct of women to discover '*everything except the obvious.*' He is therefore implying that women lack perspicacity to go beyond the surface. Later he assures, referring to Mrs. Cheveley, that for some modern women it is fashionable to be part of a scandal. Concerning the institution of marriage he is quite cynical when he states that '*it is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution.*' However, as Mrs. Cheveley, the gentleman does not stick to his principles as he is against this established practice at the beginning but then proposes Mabel Chiltern, a pert, clever and pretty lady whose wit is able to match this of Lord Goring.

At the end of the play Lord Goring utters a very long speech to convince Lady Chiltern not to take her husband away from politics. It is in this particular discourse that we observe one of the most discriminatory ideas in relation to women. To begin with, the gentleman is convinced that '*a man's life is of more value than a woman's*' since women are just governed by their emotions. He adds that the most important goal in life for a woman is to keep her husband's love and that women are meant to forgive, not to judge. The surprising consequence of his dissertation is that Lady Chiltern is absolutely persuaded to the extent that she even repeats these exact words to her husband some lines later to show him that she fully agrees with the young man's ideas. Madden (2015: 13) states that Lady Chiltern has become submissive to her husband since she can only assert this view on the grounds of her inferiority as a woman.

This play is the only work in which 'the manly man' (Sir Robert Chiltern) appears on stage alongside the dandies. He is not a dandy because he is politically ambitious and he is aside the one lapse of judgment, earnest and hard-working. There is therefore a significant opposition between this figure, the manly gentleman and Lord Goring, the effeminate dandy: the earnest efficiency of the first counteracts with the calculated idleness of the second.

Emblematic of an older generation of society women it is Lady Markby who also counterpoises the character of Lady Chiltern. Lady Markby assures that '*nothing is so dangerous as being too modern*' and among other sexist remarks she laments the effects of politics and the higher education of women on married life. Lady Chiltern will qualify as heresy Lady Markby's words since both her and her husband are strong defenders of the Higher Education of Women. The

old lady indeed justifies her thoughts to her conservative education where they were taught '*not to understand anything*' but at the same time she qualifies that old system as '*wonderfully interesting*.' The main objective of the New Woman was attaining economic self-sufficiency to avoid the need of getting married out of economic necessity. Although the New Woman was traditionally associated with an antipathy towards marriage, most of them were not categorically opposed to it but rather wished it to be freely chosen. (Aalto, 2010: 15). Moreover, for some thinkers such as George Gissing addressing the educational needs of women would bring sexual anarchy for a time, but he maintained that the ramifications would not be too destructive. This reluctantly feminist approach was very popular at that time in relation to women's education.

We can then assume that whereas Lady Markby is emblematic of the traditional Victorian repressed woman, Lady Chiltern embodies some of the characteristics attributed to the above mentioned New Woman. She encourages women in society to find '*a serious purpose in life*' (education), she takes part in the Woman's Liberal Association and, as we have analyzed, she firmly encourages women's high education. However, although she promotes some feminist values associated with the New Woman, in her own life she proves to be sometimes quite submissive. We have already explained how she is easily convinced by Lord Goring's misogynist comments. Also, it is through her marriage that she can afford her relative independence and her own political aspirations are enabled by Lord Chiltern's status (Aalto, 2010: 16).

Also sexist are some comments we find in Lord Goring's father, Lord Caversham. He is a stuffy and old-fashioned gentleman who is firmly opposed to the excesses of his son. When Lord Goring comments that commonsensical women are ugly his father assures that no woman has common sense at all.

To conclude, when Robert Chiltern's corrupted past is discovered by his wife she is absolutely disappointed and devastated with the terrible news. Indeed, she believes that the past is the absolute and sole acceptable way of judging an individual (Madden, 2015: 7). He then delivers a long speech on the mistake women made when they idealize their husbands: '*why do you place us on monstrous pedestals?*' he wonders. He assures that the way men love is more natural and sincere since they do not create false idols as women do. This speech is the final touch of the second Act and is also important in relation to the title of the play, which obviously makes

reference to the mournful Robert Chiltern. One may also argue that this violent rant, nevertheless, casts the blame fully upon Lady Chiltern.

As aforementioned, Yingyi Li and Li Yi (2055: 1023) stated that the personality of woman was shown by means of the masculine perspective. In this play it is Lord Goring who first gave a definition to Ms. Cheverly as '*a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night.*' Also, her craftiness is shown in the negotiation with Lord Goring and Robert Chiltern.

Madden (2015: 5) in his article 'Wilde's Gender Line: The Limits to Mutable Identity in *An Ideal Husband*' explains a quite abstruse theory about identity mutability. For him, this mutability would be a privilege of the male characters of the play because the female figures are trapped by object-representations; "therefore, the female characters' identities are only mutable so far as their permutations of identity favour the evolving and adapting male identities."

It is just the character of Mabel Chiltern who would offer a counterpoint for patriarchally controlled gender mutability. The young Lady, in rejecting Tommy's proposal for marriage and accepting Lord Goring, seems to execute a degree of control over her identity. That lady may be considered also a female version of the Wildean dandy in which she certainly lives up to the dandified ambition of making art of oneself. Besides, it is also displayed her ability to converse almost exclusively using witty banter to trivialize conventional moralities.

In conclusion, the play neither fully explains nor defines what an 'ideal husband' is but the work does define what a 'real wife' should be. This last term is legitimized when Lord Goring states '*A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them.*' By identifying what 'a real wife' is and establishing 'the ideal husband' as a myth, the play completes its tasks of creating an open and malleable set of roles that men can occupy while maintaining a rigid and structured definition of the singular role society dictates for women. (Madden, 2015: 16).

2.3. Lady Windermere's Fan.

Known in society as a loose and fallen women, Mrs. Erlynne is one of the strongest characters in the play. As I have already said, and due to her obscure past all the town judges her and has labelled as the woman who sleeps with married men. Aalto (2010: 14) assures that in terms of sexuality the Victorian woman was still repressed: even though the medical discourse was beginning to recognize female sexual desire. Having been taught that spirituality and a

passionless attitude were womanly virtues the New Woman found the notion of celibacy as dangerous and difficult view to accept. '*That woman!*' says Lady Plymdale and Dumby answers: '*Yes; that is what everyone calls her.*' It is the same Lady Plymdale, who calls her '*that kind of woman*' implying that she has lost her reputation. Other terms employed to describe her include Lady Windermere's words: '*a woman who has neither mercy nor pity in her, a woman whom it is an infamy to meet, a degradation to know, a vile woman [...]*'; in the same vein, Lord Windermere says about her that she is '*a divorced woman, going about under an assumed name, a bad woman preying upon life [...]*'.

Every people who challenged the comfortable Victorian binary system of traditional roles were labelled 'degenerate' at that time. For the Victorians, anything not readily identifiable was therefore deviating from a middle-class normalcy. That was the case of women like Mrs. Erlynne or different males such as Oscar Wilde himself, who also disputed the ideal concept of manliness (Pope, 2008: 3). In my paper I will analyze the aforementioned enemies of the normative male paying special attention to the role of women in the Victorian context.

As it has been mentioned, this play and *A Woman of No Importance* raise the issues of the fallen woman and particularly the society's attitude towards them. Aalto (2010: 21) affirms that both plays employ a similar method to show the error in the treatment of fallen women. In that sense, it is emphasized that the amount of punishment and suffering the women have had to go through is disproportionate to their infraction. Also, the crime these women have committed is never directly spoken of maybe because the fault is so hideous that it can only be mentioned indirectly.

A few voices in the play will defend that lady's good name as for instance the sweet older man, Lord August Lorton, who is in love with her and wants to become her husband. He, in a vivid conversation with other male characters who are attacking Mrs. Erlynne's honour, assures that he prefers women with a past because they are funnier. The ruin of a woman can in fact function as an opportunity for homo-social bonding between men that enables the readjustment of power relations (Aalto, 2010: 22). As it has been said, all the main male characters are convened at Lord Darlington's residence, where one of the main points of discussion is precisely this marginalizing woman. As it has been pointed out above, none of the characters have any factual information of her alleged crimes.

However, the only one who seems to ignore that something is supposed to be happening between that lady and her husband, Lord Windermere, is the naïve and virtuous Lady Windermere. The first person who suggests this affair is the charming bachelor Lord

Darlington, who seems to be in love with the young lady. They have a long conversation at the beginning of the play and Lord Darlington asks her if the same rules must be applied for men and women when they commit a fault. The lady's answer is categorically positive and this speech reminds us of that of young Hester in *A Woman of No Importance*. What pure Margaret ignores is that Lord Darlington is making reference to her own husband and the controversial Mrs. Erlynne.

Davies (2015: 179) suggests that there is a strand of late-Victorian antifeminist discourse that positions women themselves as oppressing their 'sisters' in judgments about moral behavior. In fact, Lady Windermere berated Lord Darlington for not telling her about her husband's apparent affair with Mrs. Erlynne, to which he responds: '*I couldn't! A man can't tell these things about another man!*' This is the crux of the difference between same-sex friendship for men and women in Wilde's Society Plays: men protect one another via a deep-seated sense of homosocial bonding, yet women do not always exercise such gendered loyalty or solidarity.

Back to the fallen figure, the first glimpse we perceive of Mrs. Erlynne is one of a self-confident person who burst into the party displaying a refined wit. She addresses the host of the event, Lady Windermere, in quite eloquent terms asking for her attention to integrate her with the rest of the guests. She assures, ironically, that she can handle men but that she is afraid of women; in fact, when she assures that '*The men I can always manage*' Wilde is referring comically to the fact that she has been with many men. Her confidence is displayed in utterances like this one: '*With a proper background women can do anything*' which is addressed to Lord Windermere when she is asking for a '*handsome settlement*' from her suitor Lord Augustus.

'*Awfully commercial, women nowadays*' assures Dumby making reference to Mrs. Erlynne and he is right. The woman not only blackmails Lord Windermere with the secret they share and extort his money but she also wants to obtain a proper dowry from her future husband as it has been mentioned above.

Nevertheless, the materialistic feature is not the only trait of Mrs. Erlynne's personality. In her long speech at the beginning of Act III to convince Lady Windermere to come back with her husband she displays a profound preoccupation with motherhood. She does not want her daughter to commit the same mistakes as herself when she abandoned her; for that reason she insists on the fact that '*you must stay with your child*'. In this same discourse she describes her situation in quite sad and explicit terms: '*You don't know what is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at- to be an outcast!*'; in this way she wants to prevent

the young lady from suffering a similar shame. As a consequence, we can affirm that she behaves as a caring mother taking care of her daughter with all her good will.

In relation to the aforementioned concept of the New Woman, Alto (2010: 14) affirms that for this woman fertility and intellect were two not-coinciding characteristics: the New Woman was intended to develop her mind and therefore her ability to reproduce would be compromised, which meant that she was a danger to the established social order.

Opposed to Mrs. Erlynne stands the righteous and laudable Lady Windermere. This lady also embodies some of the theoretical background on women that the play offers. At the beginning of Act III she alludes to the paradoxical behavior of men because they dislike women who treat them well and they remain faithful to the women who are not good with them. Besides, when she is wooed by Lord Darlington she affirms that she is against the excessive use of compliments to court women.

Powell (1997: 183) cites that there is a significant abyss between the first and rarely cited draft of this play and the definitive version, which shows a considerably more sympathetic approach of the 'Puritan' woman, whose figure is somehow softened. Powell (1997: 183) argues that it is as if the playwright were negotiating radical feminist views with his own deep aversion towards them.

As Davies (2015: 184) exposes, friendship between women can have feminist consequences in challenging the judgments of a patriarchal society. This play explores the possibility for women to support each other as Lady Windermere, a 'good' woman, comes to realize that her opinion upon other woman, Mrs. Erlynne, is misguided. When she realizes the sacrifice that Mrs. Erlynne has made for her she implores her husband to change his mind about her: '*Bad women, as they are termed, may have them in sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice.*' We can assume that what Lady Windermere has learned is to care about other women beyond the dictates of 'polite' society.

Another interesting issue is expressed by Raby (1997: 147) who has insisted on the fact that significant details were given close consideration by Wilde who paid an unprecedented attention to dress and accessories. In this particular play the writer operated through male and female costume detail and there is a significant visual contrast between Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne in Act III: the Puritan standing in Lord Darlington's room with bare arms and low-cut gown, having thrown off her cloak and flung it on the sofa, while Mrs. Erlynne remains cloaked throughout '*in a garment of sound English manufacture.*' The cloak itself in fact

conveys complex associations; ‘‘Wilde orchestrates and emphasizes Lady Windermere’s feelings through the cloak, which forms part of the pattern of parallels and contrasts between daughter and mother.’’ (Raby, 1997: 147).

As in every play by Oscar Wilde one cannot forget the indispensable figure of the dandy, who, as we have seen many times before, embodies a great deal of the ideas on women. In this particular comedy the dandified characters are Lord Darlington and, above all, Cecil Graham. The latter utters paradoxical and cynical statements constantly: for instance, he admits that the difference between bad and good women is that the first bother you and the second bore you. Or he says that ‘*a man who moralizes is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralizes is invariably plain.*’ Finally he theorizes that although women want good men when they become competent they dislike them.

As a final reflection, I have enjoyed Raby’s (1997: 148) thought which explains that this is a play where surface is triumphantly dominant, a surface which hints at what lies beneath, and which repeatedly causes an audience to question what is seen and heard.

2.4. The Importance of Being Earnest.

The first aspect that has drawn my attention in this play is the lack of commentaries on the feminine condition, something which contrasts with the other comedies which I have analyzed so far. There are just some examples which I am going to describe here in which women are depicted in quite Wildean terms. The rest of the section will be devoted to a study of the feminine characters of the play and many interesting features will be taken into consideration.

I am going to enumerate and briefly expose the pronouncements related to women in the play. To begin with, Jack is apparently a respectable gentleman whose best friend, Algernon is the dandy of the work. The latter is charming, idle, witty, selfish and amoral, the precise qualities the Wildean dandy does possess. When talking about their double identity Jack assures that to a nice girl one should not say the truth; Algernon replies that ‘*the only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain.*’ This frivolous attitude will be the general tone of this character’s remarks.

Another commentary related to women appears in the same conversation when Algernon suggests that women are cruel with each other; Jack affirms that Cecily and Gwendolen will become great friends but Algernon does not fully agree, he says that women will call each other sister ‘*when they have called each other a lot of other things first.*’ It is in fact a sexist cliché

the idea that friendship among women is very complicated whereas the same cannot be applied to men, who establish excellent ties with their partners.

However, this bromide does not apply to this particular play where Cecily and Gwendolen share an outstanding and fair relationship whereas Algernon and Jack spend great part of the time foolishly arguing. We can appreciate that the girls' initial hostility changes and the two ladies bond over the gross deception that has been enacted upon them. Davies (2015: 169) would argue that the representation of alternative kinship ties which are not biologically determined ``can offer possibilities for thinking beyond the logic patriarchal, heteronormative construction of gender and sexuality.``

In fact, as Davies (2015: 70) establishes, those bonds between women can be read as a site of resistance against patriarchal machinations. In that sense, this form of 'sisterhood' becomes a way of women to unite against the injustices perpetrated against them by men; it is an expression of shared experience and solidarity. To go beyond these claims, it can be argued that in the context of the second wave of the women's movement, the concept of 'sisterhood' has been a compelling metaphor for thinking about bonds between women in feminist politics.

To conclude with these kinds of passages and in relation to the feminine world I must quote the two female characters of the play when they talk about the equality between sexes from a sexist point of view. Gwendolen assures that there is not such equality since men are more prompt to self-sacrifice than women. Cecily agrees and adds that women lack their moments of physical courage. However, the context of this discourse makes the women's theory comical and absurd because they praise men on those terms just because they have assured that they are going to be christened.

Concerning the women in the play, the two young ladies Gwendolen and Cecily have many things in common. Both are witty, sometimes cynical and utterly pretentious in their comments. However Gwendolen is a woman from town and therefore she is cosmopolitan, sophisticated and intellectual whereas the pretty Cecily has been raised in the country. Cecily then lacks the refinement of her friend but she is equally resourceful. Like Algernon and in the same vein of Wilde's style, they are sometimes given to making paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements.

One may think that Cecily is in fact the most realistically drawn character in the play since without the affectation of her friend or of Mrs. Blackness she is depicted as a natural and spontaneous figure who behaves according to her early age.

Davies (2015: 174) assures that there are several themes that thwart the success of women-women relationship: for instance the competition between them with regard to physical attractiveness. This rivalry would serve the agenda of patriarchal, heteronormative society and it creates divisions and conflict. In fact Gwendolen states that she would have preferred Cecily to be '*fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age.*' The lady perceives Cecily as a competition for a man's affection and therefore it follows that their respective value is defined by beauty and youth.

Furthermore, through the snobbish, mercenary and domineering Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to satirize the hypocrisy and stupidity of the British aristocracy. This lady, whose sole aim in life is to marry her daughter in good terms, is cunning and narrow-minded and she speaks with unassailable authority on matters of morality. She also assumes the role of the head of the family, which would traditionally have been the place of the father in a patriarchal society. It seems that the traditional roles of husband and wife have been inverted, leaving Lord Bracknell as the stay-at-home husband and she as the dominant role of a matriarch.

Another interesting point to analyze is the way marriage is trivialized in the play. We have already explained that the dominant conception about marriage in Wilde's work is the one offered by the dandies. In this play the casual dismissal of the institution sets the tone for the whole play, the overall feeling being one of careful but systematic ridicule. For instance, for the two young ladies of the play marriage is something so trivial that its success can be completely dependent on something as inconsequential as having a pleasing first-name (Aalto, 2010, p. 55). It may be argued that Wilde's plays are filled with married people or people looking to get married but there is hardly a happy couple in sight.

2.5. Salome

In this play, which deals with obsession and excessive passion, Kerry Powell (2009: 123) points out that it also exposes Wilde's anxiety over the struggle between female purity and mainstream male heterosexuality.

As aforementioned in the previous chapters the author chooses the metaphorical language to refer to woman and we see how Salome is described like a white rose in the silver (something beautiful but out of reach).

Li and Yi (2015: 1022) comment how the play is full of descriptions with erotic desires but one cannot find a single word concerning to sex directly. Metaphors like '*white dove-like feet*',

'moon in the eyes of different people' and the *'shadow of white rose in the mirror of silver'* are examples of these suggestive references.

It has already been said too that many times the reader gets to know the feminine figures by means of the eyes and words of the male characters; this phenomenon can be observed in this particular play where we can only catch Salome's personality through the eyes of men. For instance, her cruelty, coldness and craziness will be shown in Iokanaan's lines.

2.6. The Duchess of Padua; Vera.

Those two magnificent plays present a model of woman who is able to rival the independence enjoyed by men and also challenge their supremacy. We are going to see how they seek to expose the underlying patriarchal mindset that created and perpetuated gender inequality (Aalto, 2010: 6). In that sense both the Duchess and Vera are committed and brave woman who fight for the social justice by taking part on politics (Vera) or trying to convince the rulers of the city (the Duchess).

To begin with the Duchess will voice the complaints of the citizens and will make the effort to convince the cruel Duke of the abuses that are being committed. She will claim: *'my lord, the poor have rights you cannot touch, the right to pity, and the right to mercy.'* She not only will not be listened but also she will be accused of spreading *'rebellion 'midst our citizens'*.

The same revolutionary trait can be applied to young Vera, who is a member of the Nihilists, a terrorist group trying to assassinate the Czar. She represents, although in her own context, the new trend of women who formed a part of the public sphere. At the end of the play we will see how she even sacrifices her own happiness for the sake of her country.

Both women therefore give tongue to a feminine discourse which challenges the patriarchal standard. In Act II the Duchess delivers a significant speech on women's submission to men. After being ordered to obey her husband, *'you shall do as I will'*, says the Duke, she replies: *'Sir, by what right?'* and utters a feminist commentary in which she asks for women's freedom and independence. *'We are their chattels, and their common slaves'* the lady states assuming that in those days women are men's property as well as victim of their *'selfishness'*. The Duchess also establishes a differentiation between the way men and women do love; for her, women, unlike men, give everything when they are in a relationship.

3. WILDE'S WOMEN

I wanted to include a last section on the vast influence that the women who surrounded him had in his life and above all in his work. As Fitzsimons (2015: xix) expresses, Oscar Wilde is many times studied in terms of his relations with men but the author was genuinely fond of many women and this affection was usually reciprocated. In fact, ‘Oscar chose, as some of his closest friends, free thinking, influential, enterprising and intelligent woman who challenged conventional gender roles[...].’ It is immense the impact that each of the fascinating and brilliant women has had on the life and work of the writer.

‘[...] *the difficulty is to find anyone capable of ruling me.*’ Speranza.

Beginning by his mother, Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde (1821-1896) better known as Speranza was one of the great brave and determined woman of the nineteenth century. She was many times accused of eccentric and unstable just because she had a clear academic and political focus. It was through her example that Wilde could understand that women could be just as creative and intelligent as men and she has a profound influence on the poet’s writing. As Quesada (2001: 3) states whatever deviance from the conventional status would be considered an unnecessary rebellion in a world of female tranquility and comfort. To be more precise, Speranza was one these ‘frontier women’, as Quesada (2001: 2) describes her, who was placed in between the strict moral code of the Victorian era and a deeper and more personal goals. She was then a selfless and controlling mother but at the same time she was an outstanding poet, translator, feminist and politically involved in the independence of Ireland. As a conclusion, Speranza’s duality may be interpreted as significant influence on the author’s depiction of women: we have studied how Wilde’s contradictions and polarities are a constant in his work. Fitzsimons (2015: 14) states that Wilde’s relationship with his mother was one of deep love, mutual admiration and profound respect as he was proud of her considerable intellect and appreciative of her wit.

Constance Lloyd (1858-1898) was the sweet a sensible wife of the author. She was a compilation of all the virtues that the Victorian canon demanded in relation to the women’s sexual behavior. Getting married was essential for a woman in the late nineteenth century England regardless of the spiritual conditions of the candidate. The Victorian woman was educated to obediently serve her husband without questioning any of his movements. Constance was then prudent and ingenuous in relation to Wilde’s social life always full of scandal and shame.

The fact that Wilde’s mother was contradictory in her approach to feminism, she believed that a loyal wife should accommodate to her husband’s indiscretions, influenced the author’s behavior during his own marriage.

As Davies (2015: 170) points out, biographies of Constance have tended towards condemning Wilde's callous treatment of his wife and in that sense and as I have already analyzed, a troubling strand of misogyny in his work has been identified. Contrariwise, as studied before, some other researchers have focused on Wilde's commitment to women interests' and rights. As a matter of fact, it is this precise duality and contradiction the issue which opened and which is going to put an end to the corpus of my paper.

Fitzsimons (2015: 6) assures that we can tell a lot about Oscar by examining the women he befriended. Throughout his life he gravitated towards outsiders who contravened the rules and many of his friends were, as some of his characters, unconventional women. In fact, it has been pointed out that although Oscar was sexually attracted to beautiful young men he was also fascinated by beautiful young women but in terms of idealization or even intimidation.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have deeply examined Wilde's plays and novel acted as a conduit for women's conceptions and assumptions. Most of the time there was a contradictory approach echoing the deep-rooted double standard that prevailed in patriarchal Victorian society. On the one hand Wilde's representations of women often tend toward misogynistic aspects of Victorian society but on the other hand Wilde sometimes represents gender issues from a somehow feminist viewpoint.

It is by means of the sexist witticisms and epigrams of the dandies that the writer will be able to cling to the traditional values of the Victorian society. Therefore, these feminized aesthetes will voice a great amount of patriarchal and offensive comments on women. A strain of misogyny can also be perceived in some feminine characters, especially upper-class conventional women who reject new feminist perspectives.

However, the transgression and reversal of gender roles is achieved by means of powerful and determined characters who will voice many feminists concerns of the late 1890s. The New Woman's practices and preoccupations will be present in figures such as Hester, Mrs. Arbuthnot or Mrs. Chiltern whereas social outcasts like Mrs. Erlynne or Mrs. Cheveley will also serve as feminist representatives.

Finally, we cannot conclude that the Irish writer when dealing with women adhered to a unique line of thought in his work since he sometimes conforms to the patriarchal imperative whereas the feminist discourse is extensively present in his production as well. This dualism could be a

reflection of the input he received from the feminist figures who surrounded him or just could be part of his complex and sometimes ambiguous personality. In my opinion, despite the polarity of his feminine proposal what remains clear is the vibrant, profound and ample dimension of Oscar Wilde's feminine world.

5. REFERENCES

- Aalto, A. 2010. *Queer Representations of Gender, Sexuality, Marriage and Family in Oscar Wilde's Comedies*. Master's Thesis. www.studenttechnetwork.org. Retrieved: 14/10/2016.
- Davies, H. 2015. "'You Will Call me Sister, Will you not?': Friendship, Solidarity, and Conflict between Women in Wilde's Society Plays." In M.Y Bennet (ed.). *Oscar Wilde's Society Plays*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Felski, R. 1991. "The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch." *PMLA*. 106/5, : 1094-1105.
- Fitzsimons, E. 2015. *Wilde's Women. How Oscar Wilde was Shaped by the Women he Knew*. London: Duckworth Overlook.
- Quesada Monge, R. 2001. "'Esfinges sin Misterio' Las Mujeres de Oscar Wilde." *Revista Virtual: Escáner Cultural*. Santiago de Chile. No. 31.
- Ledger, S. 2007. "Wilde Women and the Yellow Book: the Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence." *English Literature in Transition*. 50: 5-26.
- Li, Y. and Yi, Li. 2015. "The Gender Awareness of Oscar Wilde: Comparison between his Women Characters and Men Characters." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. 6/5: 1020-25.
- Madden, G. 2015. "Wilde's Gender Line: The Limits to Mutable Identity in *An Ideal Husband*." *Graduate Research Journal. Indiana University South Bend*. Vol. 2.
- Pope, C. 2008. "Wilde Men and Odd Women: The Threat to Masculinity at *Fin de Siècle*." blog.catherinepope.co.uk/study. Retrieved: 14/10/2016.
- Powell, K. 2009. *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*. London: Cambrigde University Press.
- Powell, K. 1997. "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Woman." *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. New York: Cambrigde University Press.
- Raby, P. 1997. "'Wilde's Comedies of Society.'" *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. New York: Cambrigde University Press.