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A common explanation for the enduring popularity of Wilde's works is the apparent modernity of their themes. An essay examining Wilde's interrogation of gender identity.

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Kerry Powell comments that Wilde was writing at a time when 'honoured ideals of marriage and relations between the sexes were being challenged as never before.'[1] Underpinning social attitudes to marriage and morality were Victorian gender expectations and ideologies on sexual orientation. This essay shall examine how and why Wilde interrogates Victorian gender expectations in *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* whilst considering how his relationship with the New Woman is affected by his aspirations for commercial success. Finally, this essay shall consider whether Wilde's themes still bear relevance to current gender discourse and to what extent he is a 'modern' writer.

The OED defines gender as 'a euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes.' Our 21st Century understanding of gender is that it is a changeable social construct and not determined by biological features. The commonly held belief at the time of Wilde's writing was that gender was as finite as a person's sex and that consequentially there was a 'natural' way for the sexes to act. Writing in the mid-1800s Ruskin purported that it was foolish to speak of the superiority of one sex because 'each has what the other has not' since they are 'nothing alike'[2]. A common belief was that men were 'the active agents, who expended energy while women were sedentary, storing and conserving of energy.' [3] The Victorians linked behaviour to sex and thus established gender norms; the sex of a man discerns he will be biologically taller than a woman and his gender distinguishes that he will be dynamic and an expender of energy. Consequentially men and women were expected to play different roles in society: 'men dominated all decision-making in political, legal and economic affairs'[4], whereas women's intellect was 'not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.'[5] When women attempt to engage politically- an activity reserved for men- they are marked as ineffectual: 'Returning from a Women's Liberal Association meeting wearing a white satin walking dress, it seems that Lady Chiltern's role in public life provides her merely with a decorative diversion in her leisure hours.'[6] Society renders women ineffectual in politics leaving them with one of two options: to embrace their ineffectuality, like Lady Chiltern, and be mocked for mere decorative

[1] Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997),p.91
[2] John Ruskin, *The Ladies' Cabinet of fashion, music and romance,* (London: Rogerson and Tuxford, 1866),p.111
[3] Elizabeth Lee, *'Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality' in* The Victorian Web, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/sextheory.html> [accessed: 01/05/11]
[4] Jan Marsh, *'Gender ideology & separate spheres in the 19th century', in* V&A <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gender-ideology-and-separate-spheres-19th-century/> [accessed: 01/05/11]
[5] Ruskin,p.111
[6] Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, (London: Longman Limited, 1998),p.19

participation. Or, to assert political authority through illegal exploitations like Mrs Cheverly, 'This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert, sooner or later!'[7] David Cameron recently told a female MP to 'Calm down dear', highlighting the contemporary relevance of Wilde's social comedies. Elliot comments that '"Calm down, dear" is what women hear when we're allegedly being "hysterical" or "overemotional". It's that tired old gender stereotyping, the sort that implies that if we can't even keep our emotions in check, then we obviously aren't cut out for the more serious male world of politics and debate.'[8] Cameron- whether inadvertently or not- employed the Victorian idea of the politically ineffectual woman who, because of her natural gender make-up, is unable to contribute to the political, public side of society.

The 'natural' disposition of women as weaker than men manifests in social expectations of gender. Carpenter declared in 1880 that 'A lady should not attend a public ball without an escort… in fact, no lady should be left unattended'[9]. Out of this social climate grew demands for expanded liberties for women, 'e.g. the rights of voting, property and access to higher education'[10], and by the late 19th Century these demands had given birth to the New Woman. The New Woman 'seemed to dissolve the boundaries of traditional gender roles… The New Woman was self-confident and enlightened, and was violating Victorian conventions of femininity'.[11]

As editor of *Woman's World* in the late 1880s, Wilde was consciously engaged in the evolution of the New Woman. Sloan comments that 'Wilde encouraged his contributors to disregard conventional ideals of femininity and gender' and 'provided a platform for women to construct a new image of themselves for themselves.'[12] Wilde's relationship with the New Woman also manifests in his society comedies. Sloan comments that Mabel Chiltern is 'an irreverent New Woman posing as *ingénue*.'[13] Mabel clearly knows her own mind and desires to express her identity through her attire: 'Gertrude won't let me wear anything but pearls, and I am thoroughly sick of pearls. They make one look so plain, so good and intellectual.' (531) Gertrude, perhaps believing that pearls connote purity and femininity, insists that Mabel wears them in order that she conforms to gender expectations and is in no danger of being perceived as a New Woman. Wilde suggests that it was not only men who attempted to preserve gender norms.

Mrs Erylnne in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is arguably a more identifiable New Woman. She occupies male environments with ease- advising and consoling Lady Windermere in the exclusively male setting of Lord Darlington's room- and her discourse 'matched that of the men'[14]; she demonstrates she can engage in male conversations through her political awareness: 'He thinks like a Tory, and talks like a Radical, and that's so important nowadays.' (436) The Victorian press channelled the idea that the New Woman was a 'mannish, over-educated, humourless bores.'[15] Mrs Erylnne is described as '*beautifully dressed and very dignified*' (436) so although engaged in male discourse, does not conform to

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[7] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* ed. by Merlin Holland, 5th edn (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003),p.528. Further references to this edition given directly after the quotation.
[8] Cath Elliott, 'Cameron's 'Calm down, dear' is a classic sexist put-down', *Guardian,* (27/04/11) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/27/cameron-calm-down-dear-sexist-put-down> [accessed: 29/04/11]
[9] Lucien O. Carpenter, *Universal Dancing Master*. (London: 1880) Source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/Etiquette.html> [accessed: 30/04/11]
[10] Jessica Menz, *Dandies and their misogynistic attitudes in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray,* (Germany: Grin, 2004),p.5
[11] Ibid.
[12] John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003),p.105
[13] Sloan,p.114
[14] Varty,p.161
[15] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997),p.96

the Victorian projected aesthetic of the New Woman. In subverting this image, Wilde has attempted to challenge his audience's expectations of gender by suggesting that a woman can be both intelligent and attractive. However, these combined characteristics come at a high price for Mrs Erylnne who has to hide her past and 'live selfishly as the dictates of a selfish society.'[16] Conscious of the Victorian's fear of too powerful a New Woman, Wilde ends his play with Mrs Erylnne engaged to Lord Augustus; although she does not fulfil her role as mother, she does fulfil the role of wife so that she is at least in part conforming to gender norms.

Speaking on the New Woman, Varty comments that 'there was a very real fear that she may not be at all interested in men, and could manage quite well without them.'[17] Desiring commercial success for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde was careful not to inflame too greatly, Victorian fears about the New Woman. This was arguably a wise move commercially because the fear of women not needing men is still at the forefront of feminist discussions in the 21st century. Writing for *The Telegraph*, Odone comments that feminists 'have undermined working class men with their philosophy that all males are expendable. Women don't need men: not as husbands'.[18] Echoing Victorian gender ideals, Odone holds women accountable for the plight of the working class man because women are no longer conforming to the gender mould of mother and wife and so exist without their male counter-part; women are no longer defined by their relationship to men, i.e. wife or mother. Writing in the 1860s, Linton slams what she calls this 'wild revolt against nature, and specifically this abhorrence of maternity'.[19] Mrs. Erylnne does not express maternal feelings towards Lady Windermere until twenty-one years after giving birth to her: 'I feel a passion awakening within me that I never felt before.' (444). Victorian thinking attributed moral decline to lack of maternity, 'those times in a nation's history when women have been social ornaments rather than family homestays have ever been times of national decadence and moral failure.'[20] The residing ideology appears to be that women are accountable for social decay when they fail to conform to the gender role presented to them by society.

A Victorian audience would have been familiar with a character like Mrs Erylnne, Powell comments: 'By the year 1892… the absconded mother was a stock character who could be relied upon for a tearful curtain and nostalgic invocation of settled values'.[21] However, the audience are not allowed a tearful reconciliation between mother and daughter since Wilde attempts to expose the paradoxical hypocrisy of Victorian society. Mrs Erylnne is punished for not conforming to the gender norm of mother but is rendered unable to conform to this role because of the social repercussions; her daughter's pure and good reputation would be tarnished. Lady Windermere's Puritanism prevents her from learning the identity of her mother because she does not develop her 'simple concept of good and bad'[22] and at the end of the play 'she has learned nothing'[23]. Lady Windermere does not deserve to learn the truth because she ranks ideals above reality, saying 'We all have ideals in life… Mine is my mother' (461). Lady Windermere acts as a microcosm for Victorian morality; her resolute belief in the ideal hinders her development. 'Nietzsche revealed value as a fraud, a

[16] Varty,p.161
[17] Ledger,p.5
[18] Cristina Odone, 'Why David Willetts is wrong about feminism', *Telegraph*, (01/04/11) <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/cristinaodone/100082141/why-david-willetts-is-wrong-about-feminism/> [accessed: 17/04/11]
[19] Elizabeth Lynn Linton, *Modern Women and What is Said of Them,* (New York: J.S.Redfield Publisher, 1868),p.301
[20] *ibid*
[21] Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the theatre of the 1890s,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.11
[22] Peter Raby, 'Wilde's comedies of Society' in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.84
[23] Morse Peckham, 'What Did Lady Windermere Learn?', *College English*, I, XV111 (1956), 11-14, (p.13)

tool of domination of some over others'.[24] Wilde too identifies Victorian values as fraudulent and undermines them through Lady Windermere's fickleness. She is elevated as this pure, good woman and yet she is willing to throw it all away in a second, 'Tonight a man who loved me offered me his whole life. I refused it. It was foolish of me. I will offer him mine now.' (442). Ellmann observes that 'Lady Windermere is tempted by her own morality to behave in a way alien to her character'.[25] Her values are reduced to nothing; this perfect, 'ideal' woman- a woman who used her infallibility to lecture her husband- is exposed as a flawed and fallible character. When Robert Chiltern is exposed as imperfect, the blame is attributed to Lady Chiltern because she, and other women, place men on 'monstrous pedestals' (552). Lady Chiltern forgives Robert Chiltern, realising she 'set him too high' (579). Wilde attempts to expose the inequitable ideology that attributes all social immorality to women.

McKenna compares the actions of Sir Robert to the actions of Wilde, claiming they are both 'far from ideal husbands' but that *An Ideal Husband* 'ends with a heart-felt plea for forgiveness… The unconditional, unequal love of a woman for her husband holds within itself the power of redemption.'[26] Rather than presenting the selfless default setting of forgiveness of womankind, I would argue Wilde sets up impossible ideals for both genders in order to expose the Victorians' ludicrous fixation with correctness and the gender norms affecting perception of behaviour. The significance gender plays in the presentation of behaviour is still very much apparent in the 21st Century and it appears there is still an unwritten belief that women are more moral than men. When a teenager was recently attacked, the press focus was on the sex of the perpetrator: 'It did not seem natural for such a young girl to be capable of such violence'. 'Such a brutal attack challenged our society's accepted wisdom about girls.' [27] Clearly there is still a concept of 'natural' gender norms, meaning we still consider that gender is dominated by nature, not nurture.

Wilde and his contemporaries fought against the gender norms because they 'became a socially structured means of enforcing morals'[28]. Victorian morality also dictated sexual activity: 'According to medical theories on sexuality of that time… sexual impulses existed only for natural reproductive reasons and any kind of excess could lead to physical or mental illness'[29]. Thus, sexual activity that was driven by a desire for pleasure not procreation- sex between men- was unnatural and blamed for physical and mental illnesses of the time. Wilde was conscious that the fight for equality between men and women and a re-establishing of gender norms was the first step towards a re-evaluation of homosexual activity. Ledger comments that the movement of the New Woman was entangled with 'decadence… and emergent homosexual identities.'[30] Wilde was arguably acutely aware of the relationship the New Woman had with his own identity and so unsurprisingly, became involved in their work.

Although evidence of gender interrogation and a criticism of Victorian values exist in Wilde's society comedies, he was conscious of the danger in engaging too conspicuously with the ideas of the New Woman. Sloan comments that Wilde vigilantly featured domesticity and women's fashions in *Woman's World* because to have ignored them 'would

[24] Reginia Gagnier 'Wilde and the Victorians' in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.18- 33, (p.18)
[25] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p.343
[26] Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde,* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), p.329
[27] Mark Macaskill and Karin Goodwin, 'Focus: Women behaving badly' *Sunday Times* (02/05/04)<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article849025.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1> [accessed: 03/05/11]
[28] Jessica Simmons, 'Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Philosophy of Androgyny, Hermaphrodeity, and Victorian Sexual Mores' in *The Victorian Web* <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/swinburne/simmons12.html> [accessed: 16/04/11]
[29] Menz,p.4
[30] Ledger,p.4

have been commercial suicide.'[31] Wilde, characteristically, was still keen to further his literary career and public image and so was careful not to ignore the demands of consumerism. Wilde obstructs his criticism of Victorian gender norms through paradoxes and the character of the dandy. Wilde is able to subvert ideologies through this whimsical character because of his flippant, flamboyant nature: Lord Goring is described as '*Thirty-four, but always says he is younger… A flawless dandy… He is fond of being misunderstood.'* (521). The dandy character admits to frequent lying and so who can say what he- or Wilde- really believes. Wilde both 'criticized and attracted the upper classes'[32] through the sardonic, intelligent, yet unthreatening character of the dandy.

The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 'crystallised in the general psyche the challenge to gender definitions posed by the decadents and the New Woman'.[33]Wilde threatened the Victorian status-quo through his interrogation of gender norms and his relationship with the New Woman. Ledger comments that 'The 'newness' of the New Woman marked her as an unmistakably 'modern' figure, a figure committed to change and to the values of a projected future.'[34] Not believing art should be didactic, it is possible that Wilde instead engaged with the work of the New Woman because he was conscious of their modernity and aspired to give commercial longevity to his work by engaging with ideas he felt would be discussed for years to come. However the cynicism of this notion neglects Wilde's commitment to his interrogation of established gender norms and the social climate of his writing; the threat of blatant criticism of Victorian morality was dangerous not only artistically for Wilde- the Lord Chamberlain had the power to prevent any play deemed illicit from being performed- but also personally. Ultimately, whether for artistic or commercial reasons, Wilde's interrogations of gender norms- the ineffectuality of women in politics and the 'natural' role of mother/wife- still bear contemporary relevance. His society comedies have undoubtedly endured, in part, because of the modernity of their examination of gender.

[31] Sloan,p.105
[32] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Market Place: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public,* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1987),p.117
[33] Ledger,p.95
[34] Ibid., p.5

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