

**Part Played by  
the Wayward Woman in the “Romantic Plays” of Oscar Wilde**

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Since the first decade of the seventeenth century, the wayward woman has been figuring in the English drama. The Wayward woman has become stock character in modern English Drama. Her waywardness has been presented as matter of the past, or of the present, at something repented of or persisted in. It has been represented, also, as trivial or grave, the result of passion or of principle. Among recent playwrights, three have achieved especial success in analyzing this character (1). Oscar Wilde is mentioned along with Sundermann and Pinero as those who depict the wayward heroine.

Oscar Wilde is the writer of five social comedies – “Lady Windermere’s Fan” (1882), “A Woman of No Importance” (1893), “An Ideal Husband” (1895) and “The Importance of Being Earnest” (1895). In the first three of the above-mentioned plays, Wilde has depicted wayward women with a past. He had earlier written two, what are called, “romantic plays” in which he has portrayed wayward women, their waywardness being presented as a matter of the present. The plays are – “The Duchess of Padua”, written in 1883 and “Salome” written ten years later in 1893. The present article aims at highlighting the characterization of the wayward women who figure in these two plays.

The theme of the “Pseudo-Elizabethan drama” (2) is revenge and love. The play shows the influence of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. In the course of the play, time and again we are reminded of such diverse plays as “Julius Caesar”, “Hamlet”, “Antony and Cleopatra” and “The Duchess of Malfi”. The play revolves round the heroine, Beatrice, who is the Duchess of Padua. She is one of those unfortunate women who have loved and lost. Her first effect is that of pure beauty. She just passes across the stage and says nothing whatever. But she has looked at Guido, the hero, and falls in love with him at first sight. She is married to a cynical and tyrannical old man, the Duke of Padua. He is old enough to be her father. She has been starved of love, genuine love. The old husband treats her as chattel. Hers is not to reason why, hers is not to question whys, hers is to do or die. In the second act she appears as the image of pity and mercy. She is a crusader for the welfare of the people of Padua who are treated with ruthless contempt by the Duke. She distributes her money among the wretched citizens. By her sympathy for the downtrodden, she wins our

admiration. Guido confesses his love for her, and she only too readily reciprocates. She admits that she fell in love with him the first moment they met. But her joy is short-lived. Guido is reminded of his duty in avenging the murder of his father by the Duke of Padua. He decides to put the task of revenge above that of loving Beatrice. He speaks of a barrier lying between them, and then deserts her. She misunderstands the meaning of the word "barrier" used by Guido. She believes that it refers to her husband. After toying with the idea of suicide, she resolves to remove that "barrier". Under a momentary impulse she commits the murder of her husband and tells her lover "I have just killed him" and "I did it all for you!" Guido is horrified by the murder which she has committed and from which he himself shrinks. He turns a deaf ear to her pleas and love. Then she does a disconcerting volte face. She has Guido arrested as the murderer. She lays the crime at Guido's sown door. "In Act 4 the Duchess becomes a real White Devil (Webster was obviously in Wilde's mind, as well as Shelley) (3). During his trial, she seeks to prevent his speaking, lest he should reveal her perfidy. She expresses regret that his head was not chopped off the moment he was seized. "Art thou that Beatrice, Duchess of Padua?" Guido asks with understandable incredulity. "I am what thou hast made me", she replies. Yet he still loves her. At this point of the play, the Duchess forfeits our sympathy by her act of treachery to her lover.

But a rude shock awaits her. When Guido is permitted to talk, he falsely asserts that he murdered the Duke and thus supports her story so that she may be saved. At this evidence of his devotion and love, she is touched. She makes vain attempts to secure a pardon for her lover. She goes to the condemned man in prison, drinks off the poison meant for him and urges him to escape in her garments. She asks, "Can love wipe away the blood from off my hands, pour balsam in my wounds, heal my scars and wash my scarlet sins as white as snow?" ... Again, before she dies, she declares:

"Perchance my sin will be forgiven me,  
I have loved much."

She kisses him and dies in a spasm. Guido kills himself with her dagger. Wilde tells us that after her death her countenance is a marble image of peace, showing that God has forgiven her. But the reader doubts whether divine forgiveness is possible for this particular sinner. But he will feel pity for the Duchess, just as he feels pity for Othello of Shakespeare.

The second romantic drama of Wilde depicting the wayward heroine is "Salome". As the title indicates, the Biblical temptress, Salome, the eighteen-year old princess of Judea is the central figure. As Frank D.Chandler points out, Wilde has depicted her as the personification of revolting lust. Wilde has made a significant departure from the original Biblical legend. In the Bible, it is at the instance of her mother, Herodias, that Salome asks for the head of John the Baptist on a silver charger. Her mother hates the prophet for condemning her publicly for marrying her husband's murderer, Herod. But in Wilde's play Salome herself lusts for the body of the prophet, Jokanaan. But she takes no notice of the young Syrian soldier who despairs of winning her love and so kills himself. But her passion for Jokanaan is intense as madness. As she first looks upon the prophet,

she cries, "I am amorous of thy body, Jokanaan! Thy bodywhile like lilies of a field that the mower has never mowed ... The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body." The more the prophet reduces and curses hers, the more she begs to e allowed to kiss him. Spurned, she decides to wreak vengeance, upon one who has scorned her love. Meanwhile, she has infected the heart of her step-father, Herod, also with love. She extracts a promise from the lecherous old villain that he will give her anything she wishes, if she dances before him. She dances and Herod is carried away with ecstatic delight on a silver plate. Herod recoils in horror but keeps his word. When the severed head of Jokanaan is brought to her, Salome says to it, "Well, I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan." As she boasts, "I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan" the Tetrach shouts to his solders, "Kill that woman." The soldiers crush her to death under their shield. Salome is as much the victim of her mother's jealousy and hostility to her husband, as she is of Herod's irrational and reckless lust, fear of old age and relentless cruelty" (4).

In this way, both the heroines of these two "romantic dramas" (the phrase is Frank D.Chandler's) are wayward women. Their waywardness comes from their passion. "It is not in such romantic dramas, however, that Oscar Wilde is at his best in drawing wayward women, but rather in his realistic plays of modern life. In these witty and amusing satires upon English society, the woman with a past occupies a prominent place (5) Chandler goes on and point out that the wayward through interest. But Beatrice of "The Duchess of Padua" and Salome are women with a present. Their waywardness sprang from their passions.

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### References

1. Frank D.Chandler, "Aspects of Modern Drama". Page 121, The Macmillan Company, London, 1914.
  2. Alan Bird, "The Plays of Oscar Wilde". Page 35, Vision Press Limited, London, 1977.
  3. Katherine Worth, "Oscar Wilde", Page 44, Macmillan Company, London 1983.
  4. Alan Bird, "The Plays of Oscar Wilde", Page 74.
  5. Frank K.Chandler "Aspects of Modern Drama", page 134.
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