

**Part Played by Women with Past in the Social Comedies of  
Oscar Wilde**

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Frank Chandler in his “Aspects of Modern Drama” observed, “In the recent drama, few types of characters have been more frequently portrayed than the wayward woman. Her waywardness has been represented as a matter of the past or the present, as 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. Sunderamann, Wilde and Pinero”. (P.121)

One of the charges leveled against Oscar Wilde as a dramatist is that he succeeds in depicting bad characters, and not good characters. While his rogues and cynics, male and female, are drawn with an admirable sureness of touch and a really wonderful wealth of detail, his good people are considered to be mere shapes and dummies, feeble reproductions or worn-out types. So much so, like Milton, Wilde is accused of being secretly of the devil’s party. Newell Sawyer in his book “The comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Maugham” says in this context “Wilde’s forte is in the vices, not the virtues”; again, “Wilde is distinctly at his best with his women with a part like Mrs. Erylne and Mrs. Cheveley” (p.157). Three women with a past figure in the three serio-comedies of Wilde – Mrs. Erylne in “Lady Windermere’s Fan”, Mrs. Arbuthnot in “A Woman of No Importance” and Mrs. Cheveley in “An ideal husband”.

Mrs. Erylne is the central character of the most celebrated comedy of Wilde ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’ (1892). According to the English critic, James Agate, Mrs. Erylne is the first woman of her sort in Modern English Play, Pinero’s Mrs. Tanqueray being her junior by one or two years. She is a cynical adventuress with a past, a demimondaine, a woman with light morals. Twenty years ago she abandoned her husband and one-year old daughter and bolted with a lover. Deserted by that lover, she has led the life of a socially – ostracized outcast. Six months before the play begins, she learns that her grown-up daughter has married a rich and titled gentleman. From the continent she lands in London and gets in touch with her son-in-law, Lord Windermere. She has hooked an elderly Lord, Lord Augustus who wants to marry her.

She blackmails Lord Windermere for the money she needs to reestablish herself in society, and to marry Lord Augustus. If he does not supply her with the needed funds, she will reveal to

lady Windermere the relationship between him and herself. Lord Windermere wants to spare his wife the humiliation of knowing that such a creature as Mrs. Erlynne is her mother. Mrs. Erlynne manages to wangle an invitation from Lord Windermere for the twenty-first birthday of her daughter, Lady Windermere. Attending this birthday party of her daughter marks a watershed in the life of Mrs. Erlynne. From the time she sails beautifully into the drawing room of her daughter, the atmosphere there is electrified. Lady Windermere, who has earlier threatened to strike Mrs. Erlynne across the face with the birthday gift, a fan, if Mrs. Erlynne dares to cross her threshold lacks courage to carry out her threat. The fan drops from her hand. In a short while, Mrs. Erlynne captivates all the men and outshines all the women present, there.

Lady Windermere, whose mind is already poisoned in this regard, suspects the relationship between Mrs. Erlynne and her husband. She decides to leave her erring husband and elope with one of her admirers. Lord Darlington. She writes a letter about her decision, leaves it with a servant, and walks out of the house. Mrs. Erlynne's aplomb vanishes when she discovers this letter. Full of anguish, she hides the letter after reading it, "The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father". Her motherly instincts, for the first time in twenty years, are thoroughly aroused. She is determined to save her daughter from the fate that overtook her. Making a dash to lord Darlington's apartments, Mrs. Erlynne appeals to her as a wife to get back to her innocent husband. When this appeal does not work, she appeals to her as a mother to get back to her baby daughter. This second appeal, made with all the vehemence at her command, succeeds.

But then it is a little too late. The men, including Lord Windermere, Lord Darlington and her elderly suitor, Lord Augustus are heard coming in. Very resourcefully, Mrs. Erlynne manages to get her daughter away unnoticed. Then to avert suspicion that would blight her daughter's life, she emerges from her hiding place and herself faces humiliation. Referring to Lady Windermere's fan, lying on the sofa, she tells them all that she took Lady Windermere's fan by mistake for her own. She realizes that she has made a terrible mistake in entering her daughter's life. Her shadow shall never fall again between Lady and Lord Windermere. She mollifies her elderly suitor and explains away her presence at that time of the night in Lord Darlington's rooms. He will marry her, and together, they will leave England for good.

Before she leaves, she extracts a promise from each one of them; Lady Windermere is never to spoil her husband's love by confessing to him how close she came to deserting him and eloping; Lord Windermere is never to reveal to his wife her identity. She also takes away as a gift that momentous fan of Lady Windermere. As a mother she makes a beautiful sacrifice for her daughter, but as a woman she senses her nature too well to seek domestic acceptability. A leopard cannot change its spots. At the end, Lord Windermere says to the groom-to-be, the silly old Lord Augustus, "Well, you are certainly marrying a clever woman".

Mrs. Erlynne is not so good as Lady Windermere supposes. She has been a hardened sinner, the black-mailer of her son-in-law, and without a touch of maternal instinct until she sees her daughter about to fall. There is little evidence that she will greatly alter in future. She is mainly evil,

but an impulse of natural generosity is still surviving. There is no denying that she has got some redeeming qualities as “a fallen woman”.

The second fallen woman to make her appearance is in “A Woman of No Importance” under the name of Mrs. Arbuthnot (1893). Of her, the famous English critic, William Archer said in a review of the play in the “World”, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1893, “Mrs. Arbuthnot is simply a woman who has been through a very painful experience, who has suffered a crushing disappointment in the revelation of the unworthiness of the man she loved”. Thirty-eight-year old Mrs. Arbuthnot’s present name is an assumed name. Her maiden name is Rachel. Twenty years ago she was seduced and betrayed by the treachery of a man whom she loved and trusted. He is now Lord Illingworth. Then he was plain George Harford. He refused to marry her even when he learnt from her that she was pregnant. During the last twenty years she has suffered untold mental agony. But she has not repented of the ‘sin’, because it has given her a son to love. He is Gerald, working as a clerk in a bank. Her son’s love is the only recompense for her ‘shame’. At a party of her friend’s Lady Hunstanton, she learns that Lord Illingworth has taken a fancy for her son and offered to make him his secretary and take him to India.

After knowing the identity of Lord Illingworth, she urges her son, Gerald, to decline the offer. For she knows that Lord Illingworth is a cad and a libertine under a polished surface. But she does not tell Gerald that Lord Illingworth is his father. Gerald wonders why his dear mother stands in the way of his advancement in life. Lord Illingworth soon comes to know of the identity of Mrs. Arbuthnot, a woman of no importance for him. He urges her to let Gerald go with in the best interests of her son. He exploits the situation to separate the son from the mother. However, circumstances compel her to reveal Lord Illingworth’s identity to her son.

Lord Illingworth insults the sweet-heart of Gerald, an American heiress named Miss Hester Worsley, by trying to kiss her for a wager. Gerald, outraged at his caddish behaviour, rushes to assault him. Mrs. Arbuthnot cannot but stop Gerald by blurting out the secret that Lord Illingworth is no other than his own father. Later Lord Illingworth offers to marry her and give a lot of his property to Gerald. She rejects the offer with the contempt it deserves. Lord Illingworth, piqued by her rejection of his offer, insults her by referring to her as his former mistress.

This is the last straw. Even a worm turns. She takes revenge by striking him across the face with his glove. She shows him what he is really, a man of no importance. With her son and his sweetheart, she emigrates to America to live out her life in a country where her pitiful, if not shameful, history is unknown. She leaves in full possession of the sympathies of the audience. No doubt, she is a woman with a past, but she is more sinned against than sinning.

The abominable Mrs. Cheveley, as H.G. Wells calls her, is the third woman with a past who figures in “An Ideal Husband” (1895). Like Mrs. Erlynne she is also a blackmailer and an adventuress, but unlike Mrs. Erlynne, she is a creature to be fought and conquered. Out of the middle of Europe, from Vienna, lands this blackmailer at the party of Lady Chiltern. This woman,

Mrs. Chevley has spent a large part of her life abroad where she deals in underground finance, and probably adds to her income by living with any rich man who will keep her. She is tawny haired, red-cheeked and white shouldered. She smokes cigarettes. Mrs. Cheveley is “a genius in the day time and a beauty at night”. Mrs. Chiltern knows her as a scheming and dishonest schoolmate. For a few days in the past she was also engaged to Lord Goring, an intimate friend of Lady Chiltern’s husband, Sir Robert Chiltern. Sir Robert is now Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Eighteen years ago he was private secretary to a Cabinet Minister. Then he sold a state secret for £86,000. He also wrote a letter to a stock exchange speculator about that Cabinet Secret regarding Suez Canal shares.

Mrs. Cheveley is now in possession of that letter. Now she demands that he should further a fraudulent scheme for an Argentine Canal in which she has invested heavily. He must support her nefarious scheme or else he exposed. Sir Robert, for fear of losing his wife’s respect, determines to fight the adventuress. And Mrs. Cheveley takes revenge. She informs Lady Chiltern regarding her husband’s past. She fights till she is routed utterly by the tactics of Lord Goring whom she attempts once again to capture as a husband. Her past record as a thief of a diamond broach proves her undoing. She tries her utmost to make use of stolen letters to bring round Sir Robert. When all her gadgets from her black mailing bag fail, and when she is in danger of landing in Jail, Mrs. Cheveley flees disappears from the life of the Chilterns. She is indeed “a sulphurous female” as an American critic describes her.

It is noteworthy that in all the three comedies in which the women with a past occupy the centre stage, there are women who serve as foils to them. They are all high minded, puritanical and priggish. In ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’ it is Lady Windermere; in “A Woman of No Importance”, it is the American young woman, Miss Ester Worsley; and in “An Ideal husband” it is Lady Chiltern.

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