

Titters at Black-and-White Moral Absolutism: Portrayal of Characters in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Oscar Wilde's portrayal of characters in his famous comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* in an attempt to unravel the mystery behind the seemingly contradictory acts of behavior which are at odds with their inclinations and the attitudes they often express in their dialogues with one another. Since critics have been holding controversial views about Wilde's craftsmanship in character delineation, the paper endeavors to prove that a human being is essentially unpredictable, and has a multi-faceted self which is far more sophisticated than being drawn as either good or bad. I argue that Wilde's craftsmanship should not be under question, for his portrayal of characters is correlated to the focal point of the play which maintains that human behavior cannot be measured by a yardstick. At the beginning, I include an analysis of characters' sayings and acts of behavior, and thereafter I briefly elucidate how Wilde utilizes them to communicate his message. The upshot of this paper contests that a human being is a potentiality that keeps unfolding. The more a person experiences life, the better he/she tolerates difference and shows more understanding of people's nature and motives. This seems to be the crux of Wilde's play and the interpretation of his seemingly contradictory delineation of characters.

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde is considered as one of the most intriguing authors of the nineteenth century conspicuously known for his wit and sense of humor. As an incredibly influential Irish playwright whose works received a lot of praise and high acclaim, Wilde's dramatic canon remains as an influential legacy that still affects and inspires readers and invites researchers to solve the enigma of his newfound ways of writing and innovative techniques of presenting his characters to satirize a host of social issues that he deems as pretentious and untrue to human nature.

Among his notable works is *Lady Windermere's Fan*, (B. S 2019, p.1) which exposes the hypocrisy and the superficiality of the Victorian high class by presenting a cluster of themes which include the obsession with the social expectations of class, keeping up superficial appearances and sticking to rigid moral absolutism. Apparently, Wilde seems to argue that this mindset results in a rigid classification of people as either black or white, the matter which seems to clash with the way he casts his characters. Wilde obliterates this rigidity by shedding light on the grey corner of human behavior; however, some critics deem this

as a contradiction while others go as far as questioning Wilde's craftsmanship.

The pivotal question that the paper revolves around is whether the human behavior can be molded according to social norms without allowing any probable deviation from the moral compass. Is it really possible to say that people are either black or white? If so, why do characters in this play behave in a way which is at odds with their moral principles?

By adopting an analytical argumentative framework, this paper endeavors to tackle the delineation of characters in Wilde's comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* in order to account for the seeming contradiction between what they overtly say, how they act, and what conflicting attitudes they express every now and then. Moreover, the paper is an attempt to reconcile the controversial views of the critics who tackled the play by intertwining the black threads with the white ones to reveal the grey undertones of Wilde's depiction of characters.

In fact, Oscar Wilde's manipulation of characters in his comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* emerges as a true portrayal of life-like characters whose dramatist avoids a black and white categorization while depicting them. The course of

action they take is not far from being a true index of their minds though, on certain occasions, the way they behave is apparently contradictory with their inclinations and the attitudes they frequently express. In viewing Wilde's craftsmanship as a creator of characters, critics have been substantially controversial.

Sahai who describes Wilde as "the symbol of the aesthetic tendencies of the period" states that Wilde has always been striving to clarify what seems controversial about him so as to avoid being misunderstood since he is often viewed as "a living paradox" (1970, pp.166- 67).

On the other hand, Ervine believes that Wilde concentrates solely on the crux to which the entire play is devoted, and this proves that Wilde does not think deeply about his characters. "He dashed the entire play off in less than a month flipping his irrelevant epigrams about as if they alone mattered." Ervine even goes as far as saying that Wilde omitted what contributes to understanding his characters or what makes their actions "plausible" (1951, p. 97). *Lady Windermere's Fan*, he contests, is "a poor incredible piece, but it was an immediate success." Ervine concludes his argument by describing the play as "rubbish" (p. 220).

However, Lever believes that the play is distinguished by "its sophistication and its wit. Not since Sheridan perhaps and Congreve had any dramatist given his characters so many things to say, even if most of the remarks were more typical of the author than of the characters who spoke the lines" (1963, p. 220).

The points taken against the play can be refuted not only by Lever's attitude, but also by a logical thorough analysis. First, it is not a weakness on the part of the playwright to embody an idea throughout the play. In addition to that, there is not a single evidence to prove that Wilde does not think his characters out even if he writes the play in one day. As for credibility, one does not see why it is incredible, and what Ervine means by incredible is obviously vague and subjective. Moreover, it is not scholarly to criticize a play simply by describing it as "rubbish." On top of that, Ervine seems uneasy about finding one who appreciates the play. Frank Harris, who describes *Lady Windermere's Fan* as the best comedy in English," (2015, p.1) is, according to Ervine, "stupid" because he comes up with a positive assessment of the play (1951, p. 221). This position itself makes us question Ervine's objectivity.

As far as Nicoll is concerned, Wilde's serious plots and dialogues are desperately melodramatic", and this is because Wilde is basically an epigrammatist" who imposes his favorite phrases on his plays. But he still thinks that Wilde could have given much to drama had he paid more attention" (1978, p.190). However, one might safely argue that Wilde's technique of putting epigrams into the mouths of his characters reveals his keen wit and the great care he takes in communicating the message of his art. This practice makes some critics like Ervine raise points pertaining to the relevance of these epigrams to the play. Nonetheless, a close examination of the play makes the relevance of the epigrams to the theme of the play on one hand, and the nature of the characters on the other crystal clear.

DISCUSSION

A close look at *Lady Windermere's fan* would reveal that some characters are utterly drawn in white shades. They try to follow the rules, keep up appearances and hold to their moral compass. Their conduct aims at winning the approval of a society that adores propriety, good manners and success. On the other side of the spectrum, there are those who are presented as wholly black so much so that they are shunned by others, especially the ones who try to keep their social personae. However, as the plot of the play develops, it turns out that exchanging positions is quite possible. This poses an inevitable question: does Wilde seem to contradict himself, or is he actually satirizing the duplicitous society in which the play is set?

Lady Windermere

Lady Windermere's character has been the focal point tackled by Wilde's critics. She is depicted as a woman who allows no compromise. According to her, people, are either black or white. The way she is portrayed in the play raises issues concerning her moral code and her actual conduct. There appears a gap between what she practices and what she preaches.

Ervine, for instance, believes that Lady Windermere is presented as "an exceptionally stupid and narrow-minded" woman with a strong touch of "sadism" in her personality. She is self-centered and utterly "immoral". She abandons her morals when her comfort is troubled; she objects to Darlington's proposal that a wife should punish unfaithfulness by unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, she responds to what apparently seems to be an act of adultery by going to Darlington (1951, p.195). This action sharply contrasts with her strict Puritan upbringing and deeply rooted moral conceptions. It is implausible that Lady Windermere behaves exactly like Erlynne to show her disapproval of her behavior. Ervine then concludes by saying that "she is not consistent with herself and her inconsistency is due, not to the contradictions we find in Nature, which is not interested in chastity, but to the simple fact that her creator did not take enough thought over his character (p.196).

Had Lady Windermere behaved the way Ervine wants her to behave, there would not have been a play, and the rigid categorization of good and bad or white and black for that matter would have been emphasized. The way Shewan views Lady Windermere's behavior is valid since he looks at her experience in the play as a tough test. At the beginning, she perceives morality through her own eyes. When the Duchess tells her about her husband's assumed adultery, she fails to keep up her ideals (1977, p.161). Lady Windermere becomes so furious that she showers Mrs. Erlynne with bad names like "infamous woman", and when her husband tries to explain the matter to her, she neglects him and says:

I am not interested in her-and you should not mention this woman and me in the same breath. It is an error of taste (I, p. 227).

Obviously, Lady Windermere's jealousy has marred her gentility with a huffy, vulgar touch which made her seem a

brittle-tempered woman who cannot control her anger when she is told that her husband has been betraying her. As an uncompromising preacher, she moralizes firmly and strictly classifying people into black or white. However, when the acid test comes, Lady Windermere performs a reckless act motivated by her jealousy. This act is not a contradiction, as Ervine perceives it, but it is rather the gap between theory and practice. Just like any other person, it is easy for Lady Windermere to lecture others at ease telling them how wrong they are, but when her comfort and interests are at stake, she tends to regress and destroy all the ivory towers she resides in while preaching. It is indeed easy to tell others how different our reactions would have been if we had been through their very experience, but actually we can never tell.

Lady Windermere is “a tame sentimental wife, a bit overconscious of her rectitude” (Sawyer, 1960, p.157). What Sawyer alludes to is that she is so obsessed with morality. Hence, her reaction could not have been that drastic had not she been squeamish and strict. This proves the invalidity of Ervine’s point concerning the contradiction between Lady Windermere’s reaction and her morality.

What Wilde dramatizes is people shelving their ideals when their lives are threatened. Many wives, like Lady Windermere can be rational and sentimental unless their marital life is in danger; then regression takes place. A tame wife turns as wild as a fierce lioness who is ready to avenge her wounded pride. A conversation between Lady Windermere’s husband and his assumed mistress whips up her jealousy so violently that she sees a phantasmagoria of Lord Windermere’s depravity. However, this does not make her reaction right.

Lady Windermere is not puzzled about choosing between her husband and Darlington since what she is after is the thing she deems right. She leaves her husband for wounded pride rather than “principles” and goes back for “practicality.” She is not ascribed the role of “a moral agent” and that is why “serious” issues are avoided (Brooks and Heilman, 1966, p.79).

Lady Windermere’s acquaintances are so vicious and ill-natured that their company clashes with her Puritanism. She is either a woman who judges people ignorantly or as an “unconscionable hypocrite” (Ervine 1951, p.191-92). To maintain this view one cannot help but think that a strict moral person should close himself or herself from society. Above all, dealing with such people is necessary for realizing that people are neither white nor black. But, for Ervine, dealing with such people is inexplicable. He indicates that Lady Windermere is “a fool” who fails to observe the contradiction between her values and those of her company (p. 192), but there is no evidence which proves Lady Windermere’s foolishness in the entire play.

Ervine wonders about Lady Windermere’s flight to Darlington’s rooms and not to her aunt Julia’s. It is unreasonable that she behaves like Mrs. Erylne to show rejection of her (p.197). First, a critic should not take the matter as it should be, but as it is. Second, going there gives Erylne the chance to teach her that there is goodness in evil and evil in goodness, and this is the implied message of the play. Third, she does not go there to pay her husband in his own coin.

Moreover, Ervine chooses certain utterances and criticizes them. One of these examples is: “How weak bad men are” (I, p.228). He believes that she could not have made this generalization being only twenty one. Ervine goes as far as saying that she could not have had the chance to conduct a survey (p.207). One can easily refute this claim since any angry person can make such sweeping generalizations which are far from being accurate. It is indeed futile to measure the validity of a speech made by a jealous wife under such circumstances by a yardstick. Furthermore, the issue Ervine raises has nothing to do with the knowledge that Lady Windermere acquires about the nature of human beings. To drive this point home, Lady Windermere is “too inflexible and doctrinaire in her judgments” (Brooks and Heilman, 1966, p. 66).

Lady Windermere’s Fan symbolizes the social development of its holder as it goes from one hand to another and from one place to another (Shewan, 1977, p.167). However, Shewan’s statement is not connected as it should be with the crux of the play.

Lady Windermere’s fan is used frequently and variably by Wilde as a “systematic” symbol. The fan as it goes in different hands and places broadens the horizon of the principal character. The way Wilde handles the fan dramatizes the difference between experiencing life and knowing people on one hand, and moralizing about them on the other. At the beginning, Lady Windermere conceives people as either good or bad, and this is exactly the thing that Lord Darlington objects to. When the fan is first given to Lady Windermere, she appears essentially as a woman who keeps a purely abstract idea of life in her mind. When she threatens to strike Erylne with her fan, one gets the feeling that she is facing a serious crisis. As she drops it, she undergoes tension and fear. As the fan rests in Lord Darlington’s room, it proves the fact that real life experiences are sharply different from abstract beliefs, categorized views of black and white. Moreover, the fan stands for the gap between words and deeds. When it is given to Mrs. Erylne, it proves that Lady Windermere has realized that people cannot be measured by hard and fast rules.

It seems evident that the biggest lesson that Lady Windermere acquires is that the same person can be both “wicked and good (LitChart, 2020, p.4). Hence, Lady Windermere’s compromise is the main action of the play. Mrs. Erylne’s basic role is to teach her a lesson. The knowledge that she gains transcends realizing that Mrs. Erylne is “a good woman.” What she learns is that good and evil cannot be molded in strict formulas, and that it is not wise to categorize people according to our own conceptions and rigid standards. On top of that, the borders between good and evil cannot be easily drawn because the difference is often hazy. Therefore, jumping to conclusions blurs clear vision and promotes fallacies.

Darlington

Lady Windermere’s brittle temper is brought into contrast with the fop’s self-control. Darlington tries to fish in troubled waters to attain his whims, (Shewan, 1977, p. 161), and

since he is an immoral figure, all that he says "must seem poisonous even to those who are neither squeamish nor particular" (Ervine 1951, p.194).

Darlington's speech to Lady Windermere can be classified as extremely seductive. By twisting facts, he tries to convert her to his corrupt nature and to undermine her morality through persuasiveness. His speech obviously appeals to the deeply rooted desire of human beings to demur and to live a life independent from strict formulas especially devotion to respectability and established social norms.

I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or that the world's

voice of society. They matter a great deal. They matter far too much.

But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's

life fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow,

existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have

degrading that moment now. Choose, Oh, my choose (I, p. 241-42).

This attempt at conversion represents the rotten values of the rake who wants Lady Windermere to embrace his unscrupulous ideas. Darlington rejects confining people by dividing them into good and bad. Nevertheless, he categorizes people subjectively according to his own inclinations:

It is absurd to divide people into good or bad. People are either

charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming, and you

Lady Windermere cannot help belonging to them (I, p.217).

Darlington is indeed right in describing the cynic as "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing" (III, p.285). This description fits him perfectly. Darlington's portrait is true to life since one often finds opportunists who forge the truth to achieve their goals. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the quote above implies that if Lady Windermere is a blindly dogmatic person who classifies people as either black or white, Darlington is a person who consciously forges facts and classifies people to attain his goals and to satisfy his whims. It is wrong to assume that people are either black or white. By the same token, it is equally wrong to say that people are either charming or tedious. Indeed, the human nature is not liable to such rigid formulas. The human being is a potentiality that keeps unfolding.

Wilde does his best when he presents women with a past such as Erlynne whose character is not far from being subtle. As a mother, she sacrifices herself for her daughter. As a woman, she knows herself very well, and that is why she does not approve of "domestic respectability." Accordingly, at the end of the play she is redeemed from the cheapness of maudlin sentimentality" (Sawyer, 1960, p. 157). Mrs. Erlynne emerges as "sensible and realistic" in her view of society as being something among other things in her life (Brook and Heilman, 1966, p. 77).

Mrs. Erlynne

Mrs. Erlynne, who is often conceived as a version of Wilde himself is not delineated as a tragic figure escaping from the nightmarish existence of her past, but rather as "the heroine of the play" (Dickson, 2018, p.89).

Mrs. Erlynne as depicted by Wilde is neither that "unregenerate" sinner nor that "romantic heroine" who revolts against norms. Lady Windermere gives up the idea that Mrs. Erlynne is "bad" and thinks that she is "good" because she has performed "an act of devotion." Mrs. Erlynne is not ultimately depicted in a sentimental way. She highly evaluates money, and that is why she schemes to marry Lord Augustus, a marriage of "convenience," to get hold of his money. Wilde neither declares her innocence nor denies her fault; society is not blamed for that. She is to blame and Wilde punishes her by self-criticism (Brooks and Heilman 1966, p. 76).

Mrs. Erlynne goes through unpleasant experiences, but has "survived as a shrewd, resourceful, witty woman of the world." Yet, she has not got the triumph of a real character that is of having got to the bottom of things." Similarly, the dramatist presents Lady Windermere's experience "relatively speaking, at least only skin-deep, that is, comic" (p. 79).

Mrs. Erlynne refuses to yield to the limited choices that her society offers. Having taken this course of action, she might lose things of great value, but her choice is reasonable and consistent with her personality, and far from being deceptive or marred by hypocrisy. She is aware of the "role best suits her". She is determined to keep motive and manner in their proper balance_ not to play the tragedy queen" (Shewan, 1977, 164). The only thing she has got is "fading beauty and some skill in handling unparticular men" (Ervine, 1951, p. 199) while she confesses that she is afraid of women even though she represents Wilde's "feminist sympathies" which causes him to portray her as a woman with a past minus the negative connotations (Samelles, 2014, p. 89).

In fact, the most important thing which distinguishes the character of Mrs. Erlynne is the state of equilibrium that she has attained. She knows who she is, what she wants, and has no illusions about that.

Brook and Heilman, however, contest that Wilde "appears to move Lady Windermere around very arbitrarily, and to change his view of Mrs. Erlynne quickly. At the beginning, he attacks people who hasten to judge others. Then, he himself criticizes Mrs., Erlynne without giving motivation for his "condemnation" (1966, p.73). But it is self-evident that he condemns her at the beginning because he is presenting a woman who is obviously involved in an illicit relationship. Moreover, in many cases people tend to criticize others for doing a particular thing and they later do it themselves.

Lord Windermere

In creating his characters, Ervine suggests, Wilde seems to be satirizing people's obsession with their social personae. This is clear in his portrayal of the character of Lord Windermere who adores his wife's innocence and her moral absolutism. In his relentless efforts to protect her from being the

target of gossip and slander if the identity of her mother comes to light, he puts himself in a difficult situation. As a perfect male guardian, he tries to protect his ideal Victorian wife from the dark past of her mother because he does not want evil to penetrate her pure world.

However, Ervine criticizes the conduct of Lord Windermere and hints that his behavior is fatuous and unmotivated: visiting Mrs. Erlynne, paying her bills, etc. (1951, p. 200). Windermere, as he appears, is “dummy.” Being a grown up man, one expects him to be much more mature and to behave accordingly (p.88). Then, he concludes that “Wilde, surely, was the culprit, since he created a character out of all nature and reason” (p. 200).

It is self-evident that Ervine’s conclusion is based on invalid points. Lord Windermere goes to Mrs. Erlynne and gives her money because he loves his wife and does not want her to know that such a notorious woman is her real mother. Actually, one can safely argue that Wilde is consistent in dramatizing the Windermers. Lady Windermere will never get to know the truth about her mother, and Lord Windermere will never know about his wife’s attempted infidelity. To drive this point home, Ervine’s evaluation is at odds with the Victorian code of domestic morality which requires the husband to protect his wife. As Sara Jakobsohn states “most women lived a life of restraint and oppression in the shade of men” (2006, p. 2).

Duchess of Berwick

Duchess of Berwick is presented as a typical manipulative Victorian woman who thrives on gossip and rumors. She is the one who sets the plot of the play in motion as she informs Lady Windermere of her husband’s assumed adultery. Thereafter, a series of misunderstandings occurs between Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere. The events which happen thereafter culminate with a significant epiphany which results in Lady Windermere’s realization that she cannot live life without compromise.

Wilde’s presentation of the Duchess of Berwick is true to her age and to life as well. Traditions for her are more than “the boundaries of right and wrong” and a number of “rules” by which to play her own game of realistic power-politics.” She feels happy when she governs her family and would-be son-in-law.” With her lack of scruples, she might be a good object for outright satire; yet Wilde qualifies his treatment of her. Her candor and wit and comic loquacity make her amusing rather than detestable” (Brook and Heilman, 1966, p. 76). Hence, her flexibility makes her a character foil to Lady Windermere with her cold and unforgiving moral absolutism.

The Duchess is also seen as “a mischievous and detestable old woman who is as amusing as a mindless chatter box, but she becomes appalling when she is accepted as a human being” (Ervine, 1951, p. 199). Nevertheless, though a loquacious old woman who spreads malicious gossip and rumors, she is to be taken as a true picture of the social milieu that produced her, an individual who clings to the affectations of respectability and the detestable logic of money.

In specific, she stands for the type of female characters we encounter in the comedy of manners. In particular, she

reminds readers of the scandal mongers in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*. In short, The Duchess of Berwick would perfectly fit in the company of tale forgers and clippers of reputation who are skillfully delineated in Sheridan’s play, a topic that requires further research.

CONCLUSION

A lot of criticism has been directed to Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* to the effect that characters do not comply with the moral standards they set for themselves. The initial response to the play is that Wilde presents contradictory characters whose actions are at odds with their moral attitudes, and to some critics this is because he does not think his characters out. Thorough analysis, however, reveals that Wilde is actually exposing moral pretensions in an attempt to prove that there is a huge difference between embracing morality in one’s own life and philosophizing about it.

Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, as well as other plays, should be taken as a harmonious whole keeping in mind that every dramatist has his own way of conveying his message. Therefore, the play should be taken as it is, for the reader is not entitled to change the context of a literary work or to make assumptions which are not true to the events of the work.

This comedy tackles a universal theme which is how to judge people, and how to fathom the depths of their real personalities. It is such a demanding task to undertake that even psychologists themselves do not agree on one definition of personality. Moreover, it is not even easy for a person to fully understand himself. However, the play suggests that a human being is a potentiality that keeps unfolding. The more a person experiences life, the better s/he knows about people and their motives. This seems to be the crux of Wilde’s play and the interpretation of his seemingly contradictory delineation of characters.

Wilde’s epigrams show his brilliance (Salgado, 1980, p.176), and they should never be deemed as a drawback in his craftsmanship. By using epigrams, Wilde is able to efficiently convey his message. These epigrams state the moral beliefs that are to be tested in order to prove that it is unwise to categorize people as either black or white. In addition, Wilde’s epigrams are conceived with wit which is eventually the indispensable backbone of a good comedy. Finally, one finds that these epigrams serve a very important theme since they clearly demonstrate the gap between people’s actual conduct and their abstract slogans.

All in all, one can come to the conclusion that Lady Windermere, the name-giving protagonist of the play, represents the cold moralism of the Victorian society that preached high moral values and at the same time neglected them under the surface. However, Lady Windermere manages to relativize her moral standards at the end of the play, a thing that her society will never be able to do.

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