



THE UNMAKING OF MANHOOD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ABSURD MALE EGO IN OSCAR WILDE'S COMEDIC PLAYS

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Abstract

The paper investigates how the male ego is represented as an absurd, hypocritical creation in the comedies of Oscar Wilde, with references to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere Fan*, and *A Woman of No Importance*. The paper presents a synthesis of a literary analysis and social theory to contend that Wilde has dismantled the dominant Victorian ideals of masculinity: the self-made man, the noble husband and the moral authority, by way of their exposure as weak, performative masquerades based on the foundation of lies and self-justification. Wilde via farce, paradox, and the figure of the dandy satirizes those men who are so desperate in holding onto these strict roles. The absurd male ego in these are revealed to be a social disease, a state that men place more emphasis on an artificial external image than on true self-identity which in turn causes them to always be in a state of deception and in internal conflict. Introducing his male characters as either broken and shallow or as deceitful and unfocused, Wilde shows the emptiness of a patriarchal society that expects an unattainable act of being good and tough.

Keywords

Wilde, Victorian Masculinity, Male Ego, Social Satire, Gender Performance, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Oscar Wilde, one of the greatest representatives of the late-Victorian period, stood on the stage not only to entertain but also to paint serious social portraits. His command of the comedy of manners enabled him to celebrate the hypocrisy and superficiality of the society of his era with a singular use of good humor, paradox, and intellectualism. The Victorian era was an era in which the social hierarchy was very strict and gender roles were strictly followed and masculinity was not an instinct but a carefully groomed and acted out notion. The manhood status was based on whether a man conformed to what could be termed as respectable and morally upright. The genius of Wilde was his capacity to put the humorous and farcical nature of his plays to surgical use dissecting and exposing the hypocrisy that was deep-seated in the very essence of this performative masculinity especially when it came to the male ego.

Absurd male ego is the main idea. Ego is literally translated as I in Latin meaning that there is an inner feeling of self-esteem and pride, which is what defines the identity of that person. The comedy of Wilde is based on the essential lack of contact: male ego is shown as the inflated, pompous self-image which is constructed on an exceptionally slender and unstable base. The characteristic of this ego is its pathological necessity to demonstrate its superiority, not wanting to apologize in case of errors, and a belief in the uniqueness in its point of view neglecting any other opinion. These characteristics are not demonstrations of real strength, but presented as a sequence of strutting defense-mechanisms, a wavering shield of a deep-rooted weakness and of a complete insecurity in the face of meeting social requirements. That ego, where power and status mean



more to people than human relations, is not an attribute of success, but rather a state of continual self-delusion and inner dissonance, and it is to this that Wilde applies his satirical unmasking.

Literature Review:

The Two-Sided Coin of Manhood:

The Victorian era was full of social change and therefore masculinity was not a single, standardized, ideal but a flexible and disputed area. The era was characterized by a conflict between two incompatible forms of manhood, which could conflict with each other. The former was the dominant model of masculinity personified by the self-made man. This was a representative of the then-up-and-coming middle class and was glorified as being industrious and disciplined and was supposed to be a tower of righteousness, a bread winner, and a guardian of societal peace. This ideal was based on the belief of an inner moral being whose personality was so great that it could not be influenced by the outside opinion. But this ideal was highly conflicting because the value of a man remained to be externally validated, in terms of his wealth, status in society and his reputation.

On a radically different note, Wilde is the proponent of the variant model of the dandy. The life achieved as an aesthetical accomplishment was practiced by figures such as Beau Brummell and Wilde himself, and was perceived as a symbol of unproductive, idleness and effeminacy by the work-crazed middle class. This dandyism was no fashion statement, but a radical rejection of the gospel of work and a calculated provocation which implied masculine identity was not an inherent, natural condition and it was a mode of performance, a series of social scripts to be re-enacted and rewritten.

The tension between these two models is the 'earnest' man of character and the 'aesthetic' man of performance which provides the central engine for Wilde's satire. It is the tragicomic result of a botched effort to realize the former that makes the absurd male ego what it is in his plays. With his artwork, Wilde promotes the latter, applying a dandy to become a philosophical contrast. Introducing a character who is not afraid to talk about his acting, Wilde reveals the hypocrisy (which goes unrecognized) of the so-called earnest man, who believes that it is possible to have no mask at all. The fact that the dandy makes no pretense about his superficiality places him in a paradoxically more legitimate situation than the man who hides his own lack of sincerity. The conflict of internal virtue and external validation inherent in Victorian masculinity, in turn, spawned a fertile ground in which hypocrisy thrived, and which Wilde is parodying so successfully.

Wilde's Satirical Method:

A combination of farce, paradox, and inverted morality defines the unique approach used by Wilde as satire. He employs unrealistic and exaggerated scenarios, ridiculous wordplays, paradoxical humour and puns to provide a unique genre which is a hilarious comedy of manners and an incisive social commentary at the same time. One of the main aspects of his technique is the inversion of priorities in which he turns serious issues like marriage, death, social status into the trifles and, at the same time, minor, seemingly unimportant, subjects like the name of a person into the ultimate, life changing ones.

This reversal is not only a matter of humour; it is a deep philosophical comment on the ethical condition of Victorian society. Through the trivialization of the serious and elevating the trivial, Wilde shows the moral bankruptcy of a social system which has already made the same in practice. The nonsensical lies and deceptions of his male characters are not solitary incidents of folly but a direct expression of a social code which is also nonsensical. People are obsessed with the superficial and the outward as evidenced by the fact that the name of one man can be the



difference between marriage or not, instead of his actual personality. Male ego as a result of this obsession is consequently absurd; it is a product of obsession which is compelled to work in a system that does not have any respect to true virtue. In such a way, Wilde can undercut the system without directly attacking it; he just puts a mirror in front of its traditions and reveals the hypocritical, empty shells that they have turned out to be.

Analysis:

The Theatricality of the Male Ego in Wilde's Comedies:

The Case of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: The Fragmented Ego and the Lie of Earnestness:

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde introduces his characters Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff as two poles of a disjointed male ego. Both men write elaborate fictions, creating fictitious identities, the evil brother Ernest lived in London and the invalid friend Bunbury lived in the country, to get away from the strict social duties of their respective lives. It is a deep-rooted practice; an Algernon calls it Bunburying, of a male identity so stifled by the necessities of the social performance that its only means of expression is by systematic deception. Their absurdity is two-fold; their 'carefree' personalities are also as fake as the deceitful respectable selves they are fleeing.

The main satirical element of the play and the philosophical message are the obsession of the women with the name of their love, Ernest, instead of its seriousness. This obsession reveals a society and a male ego that has turned virtue into a circumstantial word, a signifier, an empty word that is able to be adopted by anyone. The tricks of the men to have themselves christened as Ernest and their eventual salvation in a farcical awakening that it is one of them called Ernest in which the superficiality over the earnestness prevails over the end. According to the play, the Victorian male ego is so delicate that it cannot be loved as it is, but rather only an ideal, fictional character that it creates. It is not only the lies that make the comedy, but the reality that the whole social fabric is an accomplice in this ridiculous game, that the men are rewarded to have successfully lied. It is not to be discovered but to be driven to face its own un-earnest and unlovable nature that is the utmost dread of the male ego. This shows that the whole system is constructed on a shared illusion in which the identity of a man is only a performance that is only rewarded so long as it follows the ridiculous rules of the stage.

The Case of *An Ideal Husband*: The Ideological Ego and the Burden of Perfection:

An Ideal Husband explores the male ego as a trap in more depth and in a more dramatic way. Sir Robert Chiltern is an alleged tragic hero, a man on a pedestal of his own self. He is also irrevocably connected with his personal ego in terms of his outward image of a perfect politician and an ideal husband, an image his wife Lady Chiltern adores to the point of utter admiration. The main irony is that all his success and luck revolve around the fact that this man has a secret criminal act of his youth, a lie that he has been trying so hard to keep hidden.

His blackmailing past is shown, and Sir Robert lashes out at his wife, accusing her of destruction of his life through her impossibly adoring love. This is the archetypal expression of the cliched male ego; he is not capable of bearing the blame of his own lies and he projects it out onto the very woman who loved the character that he developed. He views himself as a casualty of the so-called feminine adoration in opposition to his own allegedly great love as the so-called masculine love, which he says can excuse flaws.

Lord Goring, the character, is the philosophical antidote of this rigidity of the play. Goring as a dandy denies the claustrophobic principles of duty, respectability, and responsibility which shape the existence of Sir Robert. His light-hearted brilliance and clear sense of rightness give a



cutting critique of the hypocrisy that has engulfed Sir Robert. The philosophy of Goring is that the only real test of a man is what he can forgive, others and himself.

The play unveils the fact that the male ego is bound by a strict concept of perfection which is in turn a prison. The concept of the 'closet' serves as a powerful metaphor for the burden of this male ego. A man has to conceal his humanity, his flaws and his sins because he has to preserve his social status and his marriage. The heavy implication here is that the most revered man in society is a man who is also invariably the most hypocritical, which is a testimony to the reality that the Victorian craze of fuss about morality drives men to masquerade as the very embodiment of innocence. With the ego of Sir Robert, who has made and grown reliant on such an ideal, failing to work when at risk is no longer possible. His last, ridiculous act of accusing his wife is a scramble to save his own ego by blaming her to the same pedestal that he had erected around himself.

The Case of the Problem Plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*: The Deceptive Ego in *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

The Lady Windermere Fan is a play that touches on the confusion caused by male egos. The ego of Lord Windermere lies in his ambition to be a good, quiet husband hence his willingness to engage in a deceptive move of funding the mysterious Mrs. Erlynne. His good intentioned lie aimed at acting in a morally upright way ironically sets a trap of misunderstanding which almost kills his marriage.

Contrastingly, the ego of Lord Darlington is inspired by a narcissistic dream of saving Lady Windermere out of her apparently unfaithful husband. He regards himself as a bad boy who is dashing and flexible in his morality. His love, as being portrayed as being genuine and romantic, is highly selfish, being the one who is willing to twist his concepts of right to fit his wishes. He does not care about her freedom, but his self-grandiosity as a romantic hero. A basic irony of the play is that, whether out of a desire to put themselves in respectable circumstances (Windermere) or because of a desire to conquer women (Darlington), male ego is a boast of deception and havoc. The actions of both men may have a patriarchal basis of having to dictate the life and reputation of women, though their motives are different. The ego tries to offer a solution to a problem but in actual sense it is the cause of the problem.

The Amoral Ego in *A Woman of No Importance*:

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde gives his most outright and unashamedly degrading critique of the patriarchal male ego in the figure of Lord Illingworth. His ego is a primitive, uncivilized expression of the need to fulfill the goals of esteem and a desire to dominate power, money and respect. He dehumanizes women, callously classifying them as either plain or colored, and actually exists by the idea that his wealth and status can get him out of any moral implication. The ego of Lord Illingworth is too large to understand that Mrs. Arbuthnot may decline his offer to adopt their son, Gerald or that a woman who he thinks is just a plaything could have a moral standing that eclipses his money and status. This blindness is the real cause of his downfall and humiliation. This play is the most outright critique Wilde highlights in regard to toxic masculinity. The rational, cold-blooded conclusion of a world where money and power play supreme, is Lord Illingworth. He is the man who is the gospel of work without the hairsplitting morality Sir Robert and Lord Windermere have clung to. The final absurdity, the final irony is even delivered in the name of the play: the man, who sees himself as the most important is, actually, considered as a man of no importance by the very woman, whom he so thoughtlessly threw away. A refusal to embrace virtue in favor of power is in effect a statement by Wilde that rejecting that system is unsustainable.



Conclusion:

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde's comedic plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *A Woman of No Importance* reveal a consistent and profound deconstruction of the male ego as a social performance. Throughout these texts, the male ego is revealed as a weak and ridiculous illusion, a frantic effort to live up to opposing Victorian principles of being a man. The male ego, whether fractured and false as Jack and Algernon, ideological and fractured as Sir Robert Chiltern, well-meaning yet disheveled as Lord Windermere or plain and amoral as Lord Illingworth, is persistently revealed as a hypocrite and a hypocrite. The characters of Wilde are not merely undesirable men but the creations of a social structure in which outward semblance of virtue is prized more than that of reality. Their betrayals and distortions are not only selfish and personal gain but the only way to maneuver in a very absurd world where the value of a man is linked with some performance he cannot possibly master.

The classical and contemporary nature of Wilde comedies as pertinent and true to humanity is in their capacity to address universal truths relating to human nature and the performative aspect of identity. His work, and his own life, was an unending experiment with conflict between the desires of the individual and the wants and norms of the society. Through the farce and wit, which brought out the hollowness of the Victorian social conventions, he has delivered a perennial criticism on the systems that restrict the true selfhood. Wilde dismantling of the male ego and his exaltation of the dandy as a figure who does not feign his mask is an eloquent testimony to the point that real identity does not lie in the structured roles in which we are supposed to exist. It is instead, a flowing and self-made piece of art, one that is constantly changing and it is never ever finished.

The comedic plays by Wilde are not a set of sarcastic epigrams and humorous schemes but a classical reflection of the absurdity of the society that was focused on the looks and superficiality. His systematic deconstructivism of the male ego is a highly effective statement of the concept that our true selves lie not in these hard-and-fast parts we are supposed to enact but in the bravery to be truly, even flawedly, ourselves. His work is an indelible and timeless comment on the human condition since it reminds us that the biggest lie that we can ever tell is the one we tell ourselves.

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