

Self-Realization of Women in Oscar Wilde's Comedies

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Introduction

In this world of diversity and multiple identities, women's self-realization remains a meaningful yet a controversial issue. Oscar Wilde, an icon of modernity and individualism who wrote for freedom (Gagnier 2000)¹, appeared to express this dilemma through his female characters. The aim of this essay is to discuss and analyze the self-realization of the women characters in Oscar Wilde's comedies, namely Hester in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, and Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The current analysis applies psychologist Nolen-Hoeksema's ideas on the strength of women and utilizes the research of Kenrick et al. (2010) to examine the characters' state of being and their common features. This article first introduces the strengths of women, followed by an analysis of the three women in Wilde's comedies. Finally, the discussion will relate the features of these three women to the features of contemporary women.

I. Strengths of Women

In her book entitled *The Power of Women*, Nolen-Hoeksema identified four strengths particular to women.

- Women have *mental strengths*, namely, a particular form of mental flexibility that allows them to be creative and nimble in finding solutions to problems they confront. They focus on getting things done, not just on doing things their way.
- Women have *identity strengths* that allow them to maintain a strong sense of

themselves and their values in whatever situations they find themselves. They can deal with change and uncertainty, because their sense of themselves is not dependent on *what they do* or have, but *who they are*.

•Women have *emotional strengths*—the ability to understand their own feelings and those of others and to use this understanding to cope with distressing circumstances. These emotional strengths also allow women to anticipate the emotional consequences of various life situations.

•Women have *relational strengths*—understanding others' perspectives, which then helps women create strong social networks that support them during stressful times, namely, a particular form of mental flexibility that allows them to be creative and nimble in finding solutions to problems they confront. Women with strong mental strengths focus on completing the tasks, rather than on the process of completing assignments. (1-2).

These four strengths will be used to discuss Wilde's three female characters. In addition, the examination will focus on common features of these three women, namely, healthy self-assertion, ability to coexist with the other sex and society, and the retention of strength to change others. Wilde, who tried to fit into English society and accommodate the wishes of his audience, also possessed these features.

In addition, the current analysis will apply Kenrick et al.'s model of human happiness in order to question Maslow's pyramid of human needs. According to Kenrick et al.'s study, the top of the pyramid consists of three reproductive goals, namely "mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting" (293), instead of Maslow's goals of self-actualization, esteem (respect), and love (affection, belongingness). Kenrick et al. demonstrated that parenting is the main goal. However, Peterson and Park suggested that "both acquiring and preserving an intimate relationship boosts one's well-being", although "parenthood is not associated with increased happiness but, on the contrary, is most frequently linked to decreased well-being" (329-30). Baumeister termed this issue "the parenthood paradox".² Using the results of these studies, my study hypothesizes that Oscar Wilde's female characters realize their own happiness through their relationships with their mates by healthily exercising their strengths as women.

II. Hester—the truly free heiress

This article starts with Hester from *A Woman of No Importance*, an innocent young

American heir who is an orphan and free of strings. She is an independent woman seeking true freedom and a better, purer world where she would have the strength to influence and change other people. She supports her beloved, Gerald, with her innocence. According to Wright, in this play, Wilde demonstrated his yearning for a better and purer world, which Hester advocates. Hester, the Puritan, reveals her identity strength in her conversation with an English aristocrat, Lady Hunstanton.

American people are "trying to build up life", on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here [. . .] You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. [. . .] With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live—you don't even know that [. . .] You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish [. . .] It is all wrong, all wrong (483).³

Hester expresses her cynicism towards the English society when expressing her concrete opinion of what is right and wrong through presenting her identity strength as a Puritan and an American. She does not yield to the values of English society. For example, when she meets her future husband, Gerald, she expresses her sincere and simple admiration for him and his beautiful nature, which reflects one of the features of identity strengths presented by Nolen-Hoeksema (41).

Furthermore, Hester told Gerald, "Nothing should be out of the reach of hope. Life is a hope" (467). Her comments are based on her belief in democracy and equality. She decides to marry Gerald and prevents him from leaving with his filthy father. In particular, she uses strengths efficiently in this play by persuading Mrs. Arbuthnot to leave Lord Illingworth who asked her to marry him after many years of abandonment. She says to Mrs. Arbuthnot:

That would be real dishonour, the first you have ever known. That would be real disgrace: the first to touch you. Leave him and come with me. There are other countries than England. . . Oh! other countries over sea, better, wiser, and less unjust lands. The world is very wide and very big (509).

In this comment, Hester exercises her mental, emotional, and relational strengths. She does not judge Mrs. Arbuthnot's past; instead, she accepts it and presents a concrete solution to both Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot. In this scene, she demonstrates her mental flexibility as well as her strength to tune into Mrs. Arbuthnot's feelings. Her solution is to leave England, bestowing power on Mrs. Arbuthnot to accept that the filthy Lord Illingworth is "not

necessary” (512). Mrs. Arbuthnot further reveals that she had been “too weak once” and it is good for her that she has changed (512). Thus, in this way, Hester saves both Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot from the unhealthy power game played by Lord Illingworth.

Hester never uses her fortune or power to exploit people; instead, she uses them to build harmony and happiness. For example, upon leaving England with Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot, she is ready to share her vast fortune with Gerald (510). The ability to make this wise decision reflects one of the characteristics of women’s relational strengths, specifically the ability to “put others’ needs before their own” (103). By exercising her strengths, Hester achieves her own happiness as well as that of other people. Her approach to expressing herself is indeed healthy. She is self-assertive but never tries to control others. She coexists with men (e.g., Gerald) and society without becoming rigid in her efforts to change the English. Rather, she decides to go to a place that appears to reflect her own values more closely (seemingly, America). Ultimately, she demonstrates the power to change people, especially exploited people, by enabling them to live with dignity. These examples clearly indicate that she possesses the three above-mentioned features, specifically, healthy self-assertion, ability to coexist with the other sex and society, and the retention of strength to change others. Hester’s strengths in terms of “financial power,” “her love,” and “good” enable her to achieve the middle class ideal. Even though Wilde was a middle class professional, he maintained a satirical attitude towards middle class English people and their values. However, in this context, the author responded positively to Hester’s values, which resemble the values of the English middle class. In the final scene, she becomes truly free and in control of her life, cutting all ties with the English upper class and England because of her love towards Gerald and his mother. Hester has used her strength to achieve self-realization and at the same time, care for others and the society, especially by exercising her financial power for the common good.

III. Lady Chiltern—The Victorian Puritan

Two additional female characters in Wilde’s plays share the same features, Lady Chiltern from *An Ideal Husband* and Mrs. Erlynne from *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, discussed in the following section. Lady Chiltern is a relatively stubborn, narrow-minded Puritan feminist who absurdly idealizes men, especially her husband, Sir Chiltern. According to Powell, Lady Chiltern’s “overdeveloped moral sense” is a general problem of women as a gender (85). Her search for perfection in purity is evident when she tells her

husband that he always represents an ideal to the world just as he does to her. She further states, “Women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh! don’t kill my love for you, don’t kill that!” (533-4). However, Lady Chiltern is misusing her strengths as a woman; she never realizes that she is controlling and pressuring her husband through her ignorance and false beliefs about men. Consequently, she experiences despair when she discovers that her husband obtained his position based on fraud. Finding out her husband’s past, she accuses him hysterically, ignoring her own blindness, which leads Sir Chiltern to say:

There was your mistake. There was your error. The error all women commit. Why can’t you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love... Love should forgive... Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now (552).

Clearly, Sir Chiltern believes that women should use their strengths more effectively. Lady Chiltern abandons her emotional strength by being rigid, trying to get her own way while ignoring other people’s needs.

Instead of highlighting her flexibility, her mental strength is ignored. In one way, she is punished because of her husband’s past. At the same time, she focuses on her own ideal, rejecting other people’s perspectives and positions. Perhaps she lacks imagination when it comes to her husband and the ability to accept the reality of the world. She later accuses her husband, although she feels that failing to clarify her husband’s past is her own responsibility. In this regard, she is confusing her egotism with love and as a result, she is harming her relationship with her husband. If she had become aware of her identity strength, which is based on a core sense of self, she would not have needed to turn her husband into a false idol.

Nevertheless, her very close friend, Lord Goring, leads her to happiness. She finally presents her wisdom by saying “It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring. And I will not

spoil your life for you, nor see you spoil it as a sacrifice to me, a useless sacrifice!" (579). Lord Goring, an idle aristocrat, helps her come to her senses by explaining to her about men's ways of thinking. Consequently, Lady Chiltern realizes that people are sometimes weak and make mistakes, which is why they need love. Subsequently, he decides to give up his seat in the Cabinet because of his wife, although it is obvious that this type of sacrifice will not lead to the long-term happiness of the couple since he did this against his will. Ultimately, he yields to Lady Chiltern's silent threat. Meanwhile, she demonstrates her strength through understanding and supporting her husband's needs as well as accepting his love. Love means providing support and encouragement not exactly in the way one wants but by truly trusting and sometimes forgiving the weaknesses of other people. Indeed, Lady Chiltern says, "You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now" (580). Thus, in this scene, she exercises true strength and happiness by forgiving her husband.

Lady Chiltern changes and grows through her relationship with both her good friend Lord Goring and her husband. According to Powell, Lord Goring "expounds on his essentialist views of gender" and Lady Chiltern, a radical feminist, converts to the "very views that she has devoted her life to resisting"; indeed, the scene appears "regrettable" (95). The scene is abrupt, as Lady Chiltern suddenly becomes an idealized Victorian woman. However, from a modern perspective, this can be considered women's wisdom based on Robert Sternberg's study quoted by Nolen-Hoeksema. "It is necessary to balance one's own goals and needs with those of others" (102). Lady Chiltern's change can relate to wisdom in terms of her relational strength, as she balances her own and other people's (i.e., Lord Goring and Sir Chiltern) needs and goals.

In this final scene, we can note common features shared by Lady Chiltern and Hester. She is self-assertive in a healthy way. Her final decision gratifies her close relations. She is wise enough to let go of her marginal obsessions. Through her love, she learns about herself. Furthermore, by abandoning her false idolization of men, she is able to coexist with the other sex and adapt to society. Moreover, she is able to retain the power to change her husband, make him stronger and able to trust himself and his wife, which in turn makes her feel fulfilled.

It can be concluded that Lady Chiltern tries to contribute to the common good by using her moral sense, will, and finally love as her weapon.

IV. Mrs. Erlynne—The Fallen Woman

The final character discussed in this paper is Mrs. Erlynne from *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She is a strong "fallen woman" with wit and courage who depends financially on men, even though she is mentally independent and very strong. She makes the best use of her attractiveness and her wit, as she feels she "can always manage men" (436). She left her husband and her child, but never shows regret as "[r]epentance is quite out of date" and pleasure consoles her (460). She knows that a self-damaging way of thinking with a sense of sin will do no good for her well-being. Although Lord Windermere who pressures her to feel guilty criticizes her attitude, she never yields to his pressure. Indeed, she accepts the fact that she saw her chance and took it (459). Her approach to life is based on strong and consistent mental strength and identity strength.

To fulfill her life, Mrs. Erlynne takes whatever choices possible and uses them. She has a strong sense of self, which is never shaken. It is likely that this particular characteristic attracts the other sex. Lord Augustus says that he might be married to her because she treats him "with such demmed indifference" and is "deuced clever" (434). Although she is considered "fallen" during the time the play was written, she is conventional in many ways. In particular, she is rather "motherly" when communicating with her daughter, Lady Windermere. When she discovers that her daughter is trying to make the decision to leave her family, just as she did many years ago, she started to work on the same relationship strength skills on which both Hester and Lady Chiltern worked. Mrs. Erlynne says to her daughter, Lady Windermere:

I may have wrecked my own life, but I will not let your wreck yours. You-why, you are a mere girl, you would be lost. You haven't got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage. You couldn't stand dishonor (448).

In this scene, she puts aside her identity as a scandalous woman to present her identity as a mother. Furthermore, she sacrifices her engagement with Lord Augustus in an attempt to save her daughter when the crowd of men, including Lord Windermere, finds her daughter's fan in Lord Darlington's room. Mrs. Erlynne teaches her daughter to truly value herself. Her daughter returns home, realizing that it is important to be with her children; moreover, she realized that running away from home to engage in an affair because of revenge is not wise. The important point in this scene is that Mrs. Erlynne senses that her daughter is not

in love with Lord Darlington at all, but is flying to him to revenge her husband's gossiped affair (which was, in reality, a misconception). Mrs. Erlynne tries to convince her daughter to have the strength to see things from her own perspective and judge things on her own.

In the final scene, Mrs. Erlynne proves her strength and wisdom by not revealing to her daughter that she is her mother. She knows that there is no room for her in either Lady Windermere's life or London society: "Yes; I am going to live abroad again. The English climate doesn't suit me. My heart is affected here, and that I don't like. London is too full of fogs and—serious people" (457). Mrs. Erlynne walks away with her future husband, Lord Augustus, who has accepted her the way she is. Thus, the curtain falls with a happy conclusion. In this play, Mrs. Erlynne asserts herself in a healthy manner without being obsequious or arrogant, just accepting the way she is as well as her own past. She happily coexists with men, particularly with Lord Augustus who is truly in love with her. She learns about who she is through her marriage to him. She also has the strength to make her daughter, Lady Windermere, feel stronger and wiser woman. As a result, by using her wit and attractiveness as her weapon, Mrs. Erlynne contributes to her family and herself. Mrs. Erlynne's strength can be observed through her actions, especially when she withholds her impulse to reveal her identity as a mother and leaving the Windermers in peace.

Conclusion

According to this analysis, the three women in Wilde's comedies share specific features—namely, healthy self-assertion, ability to coexist with the other sex and society, and the strength to change others and thus achieve relative happiness by healthily exercising their power as women. They also realize who they are as women through their relationships with their significant others. The important feature that all three women share is that they show respect for the Victorian convention and society. Ultimately, they are all aware of the balance and happiness of the people they love. They change their priorities, as necessary, to satisfy others. Although such behavior can be considered a sacrifice, it could also be interpreted as a strong ability to exercise relational strengths. As Nolen-Hoeksema stated, these strengths build "other's lives and grow families, friendships, teams, and communities that are marked by open communication, cooperation, and mutual respect"; these strengths are "assets", not liabilities, when "it comes to negotiating deals, nurturing talent, and motivating others" (103). Indeed, these three women influenced others' lives while simultaneously finding happiness and well-being through their relationships with their mates.

This article has revealed that the three women in Wilde's comedies have achieved self-realization in their own ways. In light of this discussion, an important question arises: What can we, who live in the world of multiple identities, learn from these three women? All three women, while living in a patriarchal world, achieved their own happiness and shared their happiness with others without self-degrading themselves or being brutal. They found a way to make everyone feel "at home". Duyvendak introduced Heidegger's idea that "homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world", stating that it is necessary to take emotions related to "feeling at home" very seriously since "belonging" is an existential need (106). Since the gender revolution, women are no longer "homemakers"; instead, they can contribute to society by using their own powers, enabling people to feel at home, that is, to be themselves freely. We could sense the sympathy of the author, the Irish genius married homosexual humanist and a middle class professional writer who remained an outsider in London society all through his life, towards courageous women who are not afraid to exercise their power. The women in his works help us become aware of the importance of recognizing ourselves for the common good of the community and the world.

Notes

This paper is based on the presentation "Oscar Wilde Sakuhin ni Okeru Jyosei no Jikojitugen" given at the 35th meeting of The Oscar Wilde Society of Japan. (December 10, 2010, Keio University).

- 1 Regenia, Gagnier. *The Insatiability of Human Wants*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000).
- 2 For further discussion, see Rinako Miyata. "Freedom and Innocence in *A Woman of No Importance*". *Joyuu, Engeki, Hikakubunka*. ed. Yoshio Maruhashi. (Tokyo: Eikosha, 2010).
- 3 Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003). All subsequent citations of Wilde's works are taken from this edition.

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