

The Evil New Woman in Oscar Wilde's Salome and A Woman of No Importance

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Abstract

This research deals with Oscar Wilde's two selected plays, *Salome* and *A Woman of no Importance* and, shedding light and concentrating on the author's treatment of woman protagonists in these two plays. Wilde wants to prove that the Victorian period has witnessed the appearance of the new evil woman, the spiteful woman who tries to achieve her goals throughout her sexuality regardless of morals and the common sense. He presents a realistic view of evil woman's existence of the utmost importance to expose that evil is never stop and at last terminate in ruin.

Introduction:

The Victorian era (1837-1901), marked by many changes, affected woman figures who played different roles such as the factory woman, the ideal woman, nunnery girl, evil woman and even the prostitute. Women play different roles and are presented in literary works as enjoying either a high or low social status. In their writings, many dramatists, such as George Bernard Shaw, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde and others focus on portraying a woman figure and her role in society either positively or negatively. Women are viewed differently from men both physically and intellectually.

Oscar Wilde (1854 –1900) was an Irish playwright, novelist, essayist and poet. His main concern is to reveal the dark aspects of the Victorian Era. This research revolves around the theme of the spiteful woman in two of Wild's plays—such as woman usually has a desire to harm, anger, or defeat someone. Hence, the research is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one discusses Wilde's play *A Woman of no Importance* (WNI) to show the hypocrisy of the English upper class that creates an evil new woman who destroys the family and the home. Section two illustrates and unfolds the new evil woman in *Salome*, and addresses the legend of Salome. This section shows how a woman's excessive desires cause the ruin and downfall of the family in which she is living. The conclusion sums up the findings which this study reaches at as far as the new woman is concerned who is completely different from the Victorian one since she is not submissive as Ellmann Richard observes (375-76).

Many economic, social, and political reasons pushed a woman to be either passive or evil. Moreover, her sense of hatred, jealousy, excessive desires, revenge, depression and other psychological causes might increase her power for destruction and turn her to be an evil one.

1. *Salome*

1.1 The Legend of Salome:

Girard René says that the legend of Salome has its origin in the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark (Matthew 14, 3-11) (Mark 6, 17-28). On the occasion of his birthday, Herod Tetrarch of Judaea asks his step daughter Salome to dance the dance of Seven Veils. In return, she asks for the head of Jokanaan, John the Baptist, because he says that the marriage of her mother Herodias to the king Herod is incestuous. This speech makes her mother so angry that Salome decides to avenge her mother by killing him. She has used all her evil power to get what she wants (311).

Joseph Bristow notes that this legend has greatly influenced Wilde. Moreover, both Gustave Flaubert's short story *Herodias* (1877) and the painter Gustave Moreau's painting "Salome Dancing before Herod (1876) affect Wilde's work. So, he writes this play first in French then Lord Alfred Douglas has translated it into English (96).

2.2 Salome as an Evil Woman:

Salome (1891), a one act play, is regarded as a tragedy, because it arouses two kinds of feelings, pity and fear, and has a tragic end. According to the ancient Greek, this kind of drama can be defined as "any composition with a somber theme carried to a disastrous conclusion" (Shaw 381). Also Aristotle defines it as "a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear" (Poetics). In it, the character of the new woman, Salome, is considered the incarnation of decadence, the kind of behavior that shows low morals.

The plot of *Salome* is derived from the Bible. Wilde portrays Salome as the most evil and satanic woman who destroys everything around her just to achieve her incestuous desire that of complete control over all the men in her life. This causes a total ruin and the downfall of family.

Salome was produced at the end of the nineteenth century. It represents life by reproducing everyday physical behaviors and habits in identifiable environments in order to invoke the inner lives of the characters, showing both spiritual and sensual emotions of the characters in the play.

Salome is set in the palace of Herod, the Tetrarch of Judaea, celebrating his birthday. Herod invites Salome, saying "Salome come drink a little with me. I have here a wine that is exquisite. Caesar himself sent it

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to me. Dip into thy little red lips that I may drain the cup" (Wilde 593). When she refuses his request, he tries to tempt her, first by drink, then by food and finally by the throne of her mother to indicate that she will be the Queen. This offer discloses that the relationship between Herod and Herodias, the Queen, is detached. They are separated though they are married and the family is shattered because of Herod's desire for her daughter, Salome. According to Nassaar "Herodias and Salome are sexual rivals, and Salome is the ultimate victor" (1974, 99).

Through the conversation between the two soldiers, The Young Syrian and a page, it is noticed that Salome, the protagonist of the play, is a very beautiful woman with a so mysterious charm that she can attract any man. Moreover, when The Young Syrian advises the page to avoid looking at her, it is recognized that she seems to be an evil woman because she intends to seduce others, a fact that foreshadows a horrible thing that may happen in future.

The voice of the imprisoned prophet, Jokanaan, John the Baptist, interjects the soldiers' conversation which shows that Salome's father has been imprisoned in the same cistern for twelve years before he is murdered by his brother Herod who has later married Salome's mother Herodias. Herod, a corrupt and cruel man, used all violent means in order to take the throne. Here, it is clearly shown that Salome has lived in a shattered family due to her uncle's evil and greediness. His adulterous marriage to the queen never hinders his desire for Salome, his step daughter and niece. On the other hand, Salome is aware that Herod is attracted to her so she decides to use his attraction for her evil practices. By presenting such a kind of woman like Salome who uses her beauty and seduction to rise and get what she wants, Wilde portrays collapsed and shattered family whose roots are embedded in evil and incest. Wilde's intention is to show the connection between the evil and corrupted image of a woman with the destruction of a health, harmonious and united family.

Inside prison Jakanaan starts to shout. His voice foreshadows death and is considered a reminder of the evil and chaos that will be caused due to Herod's adulterous marriage to the Queen. When Salome hears his voice, she starts to seduce the soldiers in order to bring him to her. She uses all evil means possible to achieve her goal. When Jokanaan comes in front of her, he begins to attack the kingdom and her mother saying: "Bid her rise from the bed of her abominations, from the bed of her incestuousness, that she may hear the words of him who prepareth the way of the lord, that she may repent her of her iniquities" (Wilde 588). She tries to approach him but he rejects that. His rejection makes her more attracted to him. Nassaar

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remarks that "Salome is fascinated by the death like quality of Jokanaan" (Ibid., 83). This shows her demonic nature to control him, and this is what she does with other men. Jennie Tabak comments on Salome's first meeting with Jokanaan, saying:

On first seeing Jokanaan, Salome's response betrays her dual attitude towards him. If Jokanaan may be read as signifying the aspect of Salome that conforms to Victorian society's norms of 'proper' behaviour in women, at this stage her fascination with him, and by implication with her own chastity, is already countered by initial resistance (165).

when falling in love with Jokanaan, Salome is made to revolt against the demonic and evil family in which she has been brought up since Jokanaan stands as a symbol of good. She attempts to build a family based on love and away from any incestuous and sinful practices. But because of Jokanaan refusal, she returns again to evil. Here, she is compared to Cybele, the goddess of the moon. According to Greek mythology, Salome is "the symbol of the aggressive, sexually perverse female whose sterile sex impulse is directed toward the subjugation and castration of the male" as Nassaar points out (1974, 84). So she, like the goddess of the moon, is the evil new woman who uses her sexuality and other evil means to control the men around her just for the sake of achieving her desires and aims:

having already succeeded in charming The Young Syrian into doing her will, Salome attempts to use the same seductiveness on Jokanaan. But now her position is weaker as she is mastered by strong emotions and real desire. In a subversion typical of Wilde, he has Salome attempt to seduce the one character in the play who signifies suppressed desire and the Victorian social rejection of female sexuality.

(Jennie Tabak 165)

Thuleen Nancy (19) says that Wilde uses the image of the moon as a symbol of Salome and of woman as well. Salomé imagines the moon as a virgin, as the goddess who has never dishonored herself as her sisters do. However, Herod sees no virgin in the moon but its opposite: "a naked, drunken mad woman who seeks everywhere for lovers and will not let the clouds cover her nakedness" (Wilde 520). Herod and The Young Syrian compare the moon to a princess, a virgin, a dancer, a lover, and all qualities that belong to Salome. Further, they use the moon as a metaphor for the object of their desire. But for Herodias "the moon is like the moon that is all" (Ibid., 524). Here, by refusing Herod's idea about the moon, Herodias shows her refusal of the desire for which the moon is used as a symbol; it is obvious that the blood-red moon symbolizes death (Nancy 21).

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Herod desires for Salome makes him swear that he will give her whatever she wants if she accepts to dance for him. By using all her seductive power, she asks for the head of Jokanaan to be brought to her on a silver platter. In the beginning, Herod is shocked by her request and shows his hesitation whether to accept or refuse. Then he agrees without thinking carefully and orders the soldiers to kill Jokanaan. He only thinks of his incestuous desire regardless the evil act to be done against an innocent man. Rodney Shewan comments that "unknown to him [Herod], the dance expresses both her defiance of Herod's advance and her mocking courtship of Jokanaan" (138).

The Dance of the Seven Veils emphasizes Salome's status as an "artificial object, with images of masks, perfumes, powders, and cosmetics conspicuous within the frame"(Wilde 480). In this regard, the dance has an important effect on Salome as she attempts to harmonize her disconnected family. Thus, the dance is considered a revolt against all her evil forces that dominate her character. She suffers from an inner struggle between the forces of good and evil, though unfortunately the evil forces win in the end. Only through killing Jokanaan, Salome can unite with Herod and get what she wants. Now, she totally becomes a new evil woman of full control over men. Karl Beckson says that "Salome portrays the image of the aggressive female, intent on emasculating the decadent Victorian male" (139).

Salome's desire for Jokanaan affirms Herod's weakness to control her body and mind. Moreover, her desire leads to her death. She is aware that her affection is unrequited at a moment of profound sorrow. It can be suggested then that an unfulfilled desire is regarded as being a dangerous condition with tragic results. During the event of Jokanaan's execution, Herod says that "one should not look at anything. Neither at things, nor at people should one look" (Wilde 490). He means that the personal desire of a man makes him powerless; for looking forward to achieving a certain objective by illegal means. A person's increasing desire decreases his/her sense of conscience and spirituality to get what he/she wants whatever the means is. The same thing has happened to Salome's looking at Jokanaan's head, she starts to cry revealing her true sense of love. At this moment she forgets all her evil sense of power which she has employed to bring about her goals and obtain what she wants:

However, in Wilde's ironies, Salome soon begins to perceive her potential 'brother in arms' in her fight for chastity as a potential lover. This is a turning point at which she stops being a mere sexual object and gradually becomes aware of the power with which her sexuality endows her.

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On the other hand, her power which she has recently gained and perceived is a sword of double edges, for at the time she is able to objectify herself—to use her sexuality as a means to achieve her aims, using men who desire her and fulfill her will—Salome seems to be mastered, to a certain extent, by her strong desire for Jokanaan. She decides to allure The Young Syrian, using her charm and eventually making him reject Herod's orders, so that he risks his own life and sets Jokanaan free from his prison at her request.

By insisting on beheading Jakanaan , Salome reveals her demonic and evil nature that represents the dark aspect of human nature as a whole. For Wilde, as Nassaar asserts "offers no alternative to her except repression, no final escape from her death"(1974, 93). When she sees Jokanaan's head, she starts to kiss it violently saying that he is the only man whom she has tremendously loved in her life. This act exposes her necrophilia which is representative of the worst satanic human nature. She dismisses any concept of goodness within her soul and compensates it with evil intentions; hence she proves herself to be an evil new woman.

Herod realizes the great sin which he has committed when ordering his men to kill Salome. The play ends with death, portraying a dreary picture where evil figures out to defeat and destroy the good. It is very obvious that no character is good in this play. Most of them have a dark nature and evil intentions, especially Salome who represents the embodiment of satanic will in human nature. Whenever she tries to reject her evil forces, she feels that she is unable to do so, because she used to submit to her sexual desires which have great dominance on her character and behavior. According to Nassaar, "the ending is calculated to send a shock of horror through the audience and Wilde leaves them in a state of shock" (1974, 104).

We find that Herod divides the original family of Salome, her father and her mother. Besides, the other family of Salome represented by her mother and Herod, is also divided since it has nourished on sin and incest. Even Salome's relation with Jokanaan is destroyed since it is based on a conflict and war for the sake of assuming power. So, there is no unified family due to the existence of an evil new woman in society.

The horrible ending of the play emphasizes Wilde's intention that the Victorian people should face the evil within themselves. That is why he portrays human nature as ultimately evil, and woman with full control is portrayed as being really an evil new woman.

2. The Evil Woman in *A Woman of no Importance* :

Wilde's play *A Woman of no Importance* (1892), divided into four acts, and presents the hypocrisy that leaks deep within the English aristocratic class. Moreover, marriage and family form a prominent and dominant theme in this play. This play reveals how the evil new woman destroys the home and the family whose relations are also satanic despite the fact that evil takes the form of abandonment and sin rather than murder (Beckson 129).

To attack the English upper class, Wilde uses a satirical tone. For instance, he presents the character of Hester Worsley, an American woman who is depicted as quiet foreign to the beliefs of the British aristocracy and their morals. She finds that material things judge people severely and frighten them by their pasts. She represents the new woman emerging of the new world and is considered to be a major subject of criticism. Christopher Nassaar believes that Wilde "tried again to identify human nature as evil but this time he chose to take the road of comic subtlety" (1974, 109).

At the beginning of the play, Wilde presents Hester as a strong judgmental woman, without fear and hesitation she boldly and openly gives her opinion about certain people in society. Through her conversation with Lady Caroline, Hester shows her admiration of Gerald Arbuthnot, the son of Lady Caroline. The striking differences between the American and English cultures are evident when Lady Caroline tells Hester that "it is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then" (Wilde 466). Here Wilde satirizes the English conventions that prohibits "friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl" (Ibid.).

Lady Caroline seems to dominate and control her fourth husband, Sir John. She orders him to do whatever she wants and this reveals the fragility of marriage life that is always subject to disbanding. Moreover, in their relationships with their husbands and outside home, women in this play seem to play the main role not only in materialistic aspects but also in many other respects. For instance, Mr. Kelvil, one of Lady Caroline's friends says "the growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life, Lady Caroline, women are always on the side of morality, public and private" (Wilde 469). Here Mr. Kelvil's comment portrays the emergence of the new woman in society; a woman that has emancipated herself from her conventional duty as mother and child bearer.

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To mention the parentage is very important since it defines one's identity. If one's parents are rich, then one is characterized as having an honorable heritage just like Hester. Despite the fact that she is an orphan and comes from a shattered family, Lady Caroline and the other guests never care about these things because her father is a rich man and she dresses well. So when she criticizes the English society in a sever way, they never pay attention, and their only concern is her appearance. This shows the superficiality of the English society when judging others.

Throughout the play, Gerald Arbuthnot thinks to get a job, finds a place in society, and gains high social standing. When Lord Illingworth, an important public figure, offers him this opportunity to become his secretary, he feels so excited. For him, this offer is very important in his life since it helps him to explore new social dimension. Nassaar remarks that his "true nature is rapidly emerging from the protective shell of innocence ... a keen eagerness to embrace Lord Illingworth's dazzling, corrupt world" (1974, 115). To accept this offer, Gerald has to make some important decisions that cause a conflict between his private life and his public career. As a matter of fact, Illingworth has self-confident nature and is a highly respected man but he has a streak of evil within himself that he reveals gradually. His self-confidence allows him to impose his views about women on others.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, Gerald's mother is the only family member he has. Thus Gerald, like Hester, comes from a shattered family. The difference between them is that Hester is an orphan while Gerald has a mother. Through the development of the play, it is noticed that Lord Illingworth knows Mrs. Arbuthnot and he refers to her as "a woman of no importance" (Wilde 312). This statement foreshadows a battle of control between them since both of them have secrets from their past which will be revealed at the end of the play.

A Woman of no Importance discloses that women regard men as their possessions and claim that due to many bachelors' point of view concerning society, all men should get married. One woman asserts that she has "noticed a very, very sad expression in the eyes of so many married men" (Wilde 478). Here, Wilde emphasizes the fact that Victorian marriages are neither happy nor perfect because the women face many problems. For instance, one woman complains that her husband "talks the whole time. But he has got no conversation. What he talks about I do not know. I haven't listened to him for years" (Ibid., 479). In her *Preface to Oscar Wilde*, Anne Varty (3) states that women of upper classes do not have happy marriages. On contrary, the lower classes enjoy happy marriages because they have

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nothing to fight for. Depravation of material possessions makes their families have close relationships. Here Wilde encourages the humility and modesty of lower classes for unifying the family.

Mrs. Arbuthnot is a deceptive evil new woman. All the people who do not know her past consider her a symbol of purity, as Karl E. Beckson believes (159). We discover that Illingworth is Gerald's father, a man who had abandoned his wife, Mrs. Arbuthnot, for over twenty years, but she has the ability to keep this secret from her son for this long period in order to guarantee the strong relationship with him. Mrs. Arbuthnot thinks that by exposing her secret she will endanger her happy home so she insists to conceal it in order to keep their family together, and more importantly, keep her in full control. Therefore, she prefers her relationship with her son over her relationship with her husband because of the total control of the son whereas Illingworth was in full control when he abandoned her.

Mrs. Arbuthnot's domination over her son is shown clearly when she tries to control his future by convincing him to reject Illingworth's job. She starts to arouse his sympathetic feelings by telling him the story of a girl whose life was destroyed when Illingworth abandoned her with their child instead of marrying her as he promised. She expects good reaction from her son but the latter said that the fault was of both the woman and Illingworth; hence her attempt to control him has failed.

The character of this woman is revealed clearly. She wants to control all men in her life, especially her son. Obsessed with idea of domination, she denies, Illingworth, his son and Gerald, his father. To have full control over Gerald, she metaphorically castrates him. Furthermore she displays her true color shedding the disguise of being good instead of being a selfish and domineering woman whose all concerns are to impose control over men. One can realize that the relationship between mother and son is just as a satanic one. Nassaar argues that "Mrs. Arbuthnot's love for her son has strong Freudian undertones in the sense that their relationship is incestuous" (2001, 161). His relationship with his mother is a shameful, disgraceful, mean and satanic one. It is obvious that Mrs. Arbuthnot appears as the evil new woman who is against the unification of home.

Mrs. Arbuthnot eventually tells her son the true story which she has hidden for a long time that Illingworth is his father. At this point Gerald feels like he has lost his identity, and therefore he decides to force his father to marry his mother because of all the shame he has caused her over a long period of time. His belief in honor and duty leads him to insist upon his parents' marriage. He wants to reunite his family but his mother has no intention to accept a false marriage. This new woman destroys all Gerald's

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hopes of creating a unified family. A woman like Mrs. Arbuthnot is considered an evil one who cares only for her own desires regardless the harms she may cause to others, especially the members of her family. In the end, Gerald gives up all his hopes saying, "you are my mother and my father all in one....I need no second parent" (Wilde 509-510). Hester is a strong woman who stands up for her right and the rights of others, she asks Gerald to convince his mother of getting married so as to get rid of shame. Her point of view encourages Mrs. Arbuthnot to accept their marriage and start a new family based on love and goodness. Nassaar announces that "Gerald unites America and Europe by marrying Hester and his marriage will probably be more successful because Hester is in control" (2001, 17).

Mrs. Arbuthnot's home appears to be a happy one but in reality, it is not. It is a corrupt and shattered one because her relationship with her son verges on the incestuous as Peter Raby points out that "an unmarried mother with an assumed name and a bastard son; and an unrepentant seducer, who offers marriage as the price for his son" (152). Therefore, it is impossible for the new woman to build a family in a situation in which she is the one with ultimate control. At this point, Gerald has rejected his father and thus his original family remains broken and shattered and he attempts to start a new family with Hester. Wilde presents the evil in both Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth, who causes the damage of the family when he has deserted the mother and the child. On the other hand, Mrs. Arbuthnot destroys the family by over controlling her son.

At the end of the play, there is a confrontation between Mrs. Arbuthnot and Illingworth. Now she rejects him as he had done many years before and calls him "a man of no importance." Hence, the family is not unified because of the evil new woman but still there is the hope that a new family to be formed by Hester and Gerald, though it is dominated by Mrs. Arbuthnot.

It may be noticed that Hester affects Gerald greatly as he begins to realize that he has no need for his father whom he discards in the same way. Sos Eltis comments that at the end of this play, Mrs. Arbuthnot "is finally rewarded for her virtue when the son not only forgives his mother's past transgression but offers her a happier life, living abroad with himself and his pure young wife" (102). In fact, Mrs. Arbuthnot is not rewarded for her virtue because of her evil incestuous control over Gerald. As an evil new woman she wins over her son by separating the ties between him and his father. Moreover, her son will not live a happier life because she will continue her control and domination even after his marriage.

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Raby says that Wilde in this play makes the family relations look like an evil one since he intends to convey a message to Victorian England that "he took his audiences through the looking glass into a world which seemed to reflect modern life but which was a surreal improvisation upon it" (159). Consequently he presents an image of the lifeless, shattered and damaged family. However, one can only hope that the new life of the newly married couple, Hester and Gerald will not be weakened by a female domination.

Conclusion

Wilde presents these women characters Salome in *Salome* and Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A woman of no Importance* in order to emphasize his questioning of the moral order instead of being a nihilistic. There is a definite link between the character of Salome and Mrs. Arbuthnot as both are highly successful evils and more importantly desire to control those around them.

Wilde focuses on the concept of the evil new woman who destroys the family. He seeks to reunify the family away from evil which he regards as responsible for the emergence of the new woman. Such a new woman is considered evil for she facilitates the process of destroying the family and home as well. By satirizing the hypocritical society, Wilde portrays the triumphant of evil over the good, especially the evil which is connected with incestuous intentions and crimes. One can conclude that Wilde's intention is to criticize the Victorian domestic life which he envisions get shattered due to the presence of a demonic new woman. The evil and dark powers portrayed in Wilde's dramas, *A Woman of no Importance* and *Salome* to reveal that there is no hope for reunion, due to the presence of the evil new woman who aspires to have full control over her people regardless of the fact that they may be destroyed by her evil intentions.

Through these plays, the most frightening questions comes to man's mind that; what would happen if there are only evil woman in the world. Would it be a world where we revert to bestiality that is predominate before civilization?

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المستخلص

يتناول البحث مسرحيتين مختارتين للكاتب المسرحي أوسكار وايلد، وهما (سالومي و إمراة بلا أهمية) ، مسلطا الضوء ومركزا على تعامل الكاتب مع الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين للمرأتين اللتين تدور احداث المسرحيتين حولهما. يريد وايلد ان يبرهن بأن العصر الفكتوري قد شهد ظهور المرأة الشريرة الجديدة، والمرأة الشريرة الحاقدة التي تحاول ان تحقق رغباتها وأهدافها من خلال بيع جسدها للشيطان غير آخذة بنظر الاعتبار بالأخلاق الحميدة و الشعور العام. انه يقدم نظرة واقعية من وجود المرأة الشريرة من أهمية قصوى لكشف أن الشر لا يتوقف أبدا، وأخيرا ينتهي الى الخراب.