

The Gender Awareness of Oscar Wilde: Comparison between His Women Characters and Men Characters

Yingyi Li

China Agricultural University, China

Li Yi

China Agricultural University, China

Abstract—Oscar Wilde has been well-known in two aspects: an aesthete and a homosexual. This paper intended to indulge in his gender awareness by the comparison between his women character depiction and men character depiction from one of his novels, *the Picture of Dorian Grey*, and three plays of his: *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Salome*. In the end, we got a conclusion that his personal life attributed to his ambiguous awareness on the women characters.

Index Terms—gender awareness, character depiction, orientation, Wilde

I. INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde has always been well-known in two aspects: an aesthete and a homosexual. The former brought him the high credit and the later destroyed them all. People put many labels on him: talent, acute, sarcasm and maybe deviant and pride, which one of them hardly built a whole picture of him. He has owned many fans, during alive and dead, and even Arthur Conan Doyle was said to be one of them.

He has been read, studied, discussed and criticized by those who love him and those who hate him around the world and in China as well. From the very beginning of the publication of his works, the topic on him has never been ended. Hamilton (1882) entitled him the aesthete in his book *Aestheticism Movement of Britain* and Morris (1993) further categorized his aestheticism as the eclipse of Darwinism. On the other hand, his private life has never failed to be indulged in. A film *the Trial of Oscar Wilde* was made, and Merle (1954) conducted a lot of studies on his personal lives. Walshe (2012) made a connection between his personal life and his works.

In China, the acceptance of Oscar Wilde started a little bit later. According to Zhang Jieming (2005), researches on Wilde in China experienced two periods. The first one is during the May Fourth Movement, people (Zhou Zuoren, *The Happy Prince*, 1909; Xue Qiyang, *An Ideal Husband*, 1915; Shen Xingren, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1919.et.al) focused on translating his works into Chinese. At the same time, they (Shen Zemin, 1921; Zhang Wentian, 1921; Chen Duxiu, 1922; Zhao Jingshen, 1922; Guo Moruo, 1925; Liang Qiushi, 1928) also introduced the aestheticism to Chinese intellectuals by peeling arts from anything utilitarian. The second round began from the recent years, and researches on Oscar Wilde and his works has been lit again. Some of them put on the aestheticism only and talked about manifestations of art and beauty (Liu Maosheng, 2011), some on the collision and melting of Beauty between Wilde's work and May Fourth Movement (Sun Yixue, 2006), some on the relation between the aestheticism and his sexual orientation (He Changyi, 2007), and there are researches focusing on details, such as Wilde's consciousness of tragedy (Sun Lan, 2013), death (Qiu Meiling, 2007), adulthood in his fairy tales (Cai Xiaoyu, 2006), religion (Zhang Ting, 2006; Chen Ruihong, 2009;) and women and sex (Li Bei, 2011;). Meanwhile, researches on his word using, and translation versions have also been heated (Wu, 1999; Yi, 2000; Wang, 2008; Yuan, 2012).

In this paper, we are to discuss the gender awareness of Oscar Wilde by the comparison between his depiction on women characters and those on men character from one of his novels, *the Picture of Dorian Grey*, and three plays of his: *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Salome*. In part II a brief introduction on the ideology of Oscar Wilde is offered, in part III, the text analyses with specific steps, and at last, we offered a conclusion in part IV.

II. THE RESEARCH ON THE GENDER AWARENESS OF OSCAR WILDE

Some researchers hold that in Wilde's works, the women characters, such as Mable Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, Ms. Padua in *The Duchess of Padua*, Vera in *Vera*, and Sybil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, all represented the wave of feminism (Duan Fang, Wang Shouren, 2006). Their researches proved that Oscar Wilde's mother and his wife joined in many social activities, which, in their opinion were sure to put some impacts on him. These women characters all openly broke the social customs and strived for the independence in marriage. The feminism developed into an upsurge at the end of 19th century and Oscar Wilde was said having stood on the waves of feminism and his perspectives on

females were advanced and modernized during the “upsurge” of feminism (Yang Ni, 2006). During the period of Victorian, hierarchy was still played an important role in the social life. In the 19th century, middle class started to develop and became an essential power in the society economically and politically as well. The ugliness of the separated social classes had gradually disappeared in Wilde’s works, especially on the description of the female characters (Kerry Powell, 2001). Some researches even took the women characters masculine in his works (Zhu Xiao, 2010).

For Wilde, art is for art’s sake. “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”¹ Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* and Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were taken as his representatives to convey his own points to the world and his gender awareness to be exhibited as well.

Wilde’s oeuvre has risen sharply in the light of burgeoning lesbian and gay studies since the mid-1980. There is no doubt that his “love dare not speak its name” (Li Bei, 2011) had an impact on his regards to women. According to his education experience, it is said that Oscar Wilde had great interests in Classicism about Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome when males were the symbols of innocence, purification, and beauty (Sandulescu 1997:59). In the 16th century of Renaissance and in the 17th Western Classical, this tendency towards idolizing the ancients brought the gender awareness, too. It is such a great affection of an elder toward a younger man as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy and that you can find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare (Sidwell, 2008).

It is reported by Oscar Wilde’s friends and relations that he had not recognized clearly his sexual orientation even after the prison of two years (Joseph Bristow, 1997). He preferred a kind of Plato spirit and the sense of love but not about lust. It has always been discussed on his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that he was a gay or he owned a homosexual love affair; however, in his letter, he said that he was not an exact gay, he just preferred the innocence of young men, which obeyed the rule of Plato but not obscene. We also could induce that he just occasionally fell in love with a person of the same gender.

There’s also analysis that Wilde is trying to describe females in a manly way (Zhu Xiao, 2010). Virginia Woolf had made the point that the values of women characters varied along with the values of narrators. (Woolf, V., 1957) The book *In A Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982) was called “the little book that started a revolution” by the Harvard University Press in March 2012. It talks about the different thinking style of men and women. In this book, Gilligan had the similar point with Virginia Woolf and she summarized her ideas on the basis of the psychological experiments that women prefer to the sensitivity, while men prefer to the sensibility. It seems that women think less maturely, but according to her points, the measurement on women maturity is different from that on men, and they are equally important. Yet the women characters in Wilde’s works turned out to be different from what people generally accepted. They are independent, brave and strong in mind. Substantially, Wilde may attach what he thought the merits to males to his favorite women characters.

III. THE ANALYSES ON THE TEXT

This part presented how his gender awareness has been shown in those glamorous lines and what influence of his life contributed to his gender awareness.

A. *The Depiction on Women and Men Characters*

Adjectives can be divided into determining adjectives and descriptive adjectives, and the later can be further divided into qualifying adjectives and classifying adjectives (2013, Linguapress.com). Qualifying adjectives are words such as “big, nice, and complicated”, which express the passing or perceived qualities of nouns, while classifying adjectives are those such as “married, hydraulic, or unique” which express permanent qualities of nouns.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there are fifteen adjectives for “Sibyl Vane” (Page 50-90). Most of these adjectives are classifying adjectives. And in this phase, men character as Dorian was described with classifying adjectives for only 5 times. We can infer that Oscar Wilde’s recognition on these women characters’ prototypes was ambiguous: general but not specific image. Table 1 listed some adjectives used in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

¹ Oscar Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Three Stories*. Page 3. Line 16-18. Signet Classics. London: the Great Britain.

TABLE 1

Names	Descriptions on women characters
Victoria	Curious; try to look picturesque but only succeeded in being untidy
Lady Brandon elder ladies	peacock in everything but beauty extraordinarily beautiful ; one of the loveliest creatures romantic, wonderful
Aunt Agatha	silly fads admirable good-nature and good temper, much liked by every one
Ms. Vandeleur	a perfect saint but so dreadfully dowdy charming ; paint in order to try and look young
Sibyl Vane	loveliest wonderful soul and ivory body, white certainly lovely to look at one of the loveliest creatures exquisite voice, charming self-contained; great infinite joy; transfixed with joy shallow and unworthy

When Wilde described women, metaphor was adopted a lot. Mostly he attributed different types of flowers to different types of women. Just like in *An Ideal Husband*, Mable Chiltern is thought to be an apple-blossom, from which we can peer what his favorite woman type was like. Ms. Cheverly, on the other hand, was just regarded as a violet orchid. There is nothing wrong with orchid, while the color “violet” implied the meaning of “passion”. More apparently, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the hostess Sybil was always described as flowers: when she was dancing, she was like a swaying plant in water; her face was flower-like and her eyes were full of the passion of “violet”; her curves in throat was like the curves in white lily and she was like a trampled flower when she lay down on the floor; also, she was like a white rose in the silver, which was also used to describe Salome in *Salome*. “White rose in the silver mirror” was beautiful, yet out of reach. The play *Salome* was full of descriptions with erotic desires. Nevertheless, you could not find a single word concerning directly to sex. Metaphors like “White dove-like feet”, “moon in the eyes of different people” and the “shadow of white rose in the mirror of silver”, the readers definitely would grasp the core of them. When we turned our looks on how Oscar Wilde treated with men characters in his works, we took the expressions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for comparison (listed in table 2). The depictions on the men are all in specific with very details. How eyebrows trembles, what the curls of his nose, the color of his lips and even the quivered nostrils are all displayed in lines. The exhibitions of the men’s appearance are drawn line by line, step by step and directly shown to the readers. On the other hand, for women characters, Oscar Wilde preferred to use metaphors, especially the structure of “XX-like”. He rarely used the exact words to show the exact appearance or action of any women. What the eyes look like when it is like “forget-me not”? What a cloth exactly looks when it seems to “design in rage”? How do you know what a woman looks like when she wears a “parrot-like nose”?

TABLE 2

Body features and clothes for Male Characters	Body features and clothes for Female Characters
truculent and red-faced in a rough shooting-coat; make a wry face finely curved scarlet lips, frank blue eyes, crisp gold hair rebellious curls; startled eyes his finely chiseled nostrils quivered romantic, olive-colored face; low languid voice; cool, white, flowerlike hands cheeks flushed, a look of joy came into his eyes angry-face was flushed and cheeks burning lips parted in frightened pleasure a flush of pleasure stealing into his cheek chiseled lips curled in exquisite disdain fair young face; white hands; stern eyes dark, crescent-shaped eyebrows; Spectacles ;lank hair; an amused smile brown beard; dreamy languorous eyes	serious face shrill voice; laugh nervously; vague forget-me-not eyes dress as if designed in rage and put on in a tempest nervous staccato laugh broke from her thin lips a placid mask of servility shrill voice gigantic tiaras and parrot noses a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair long-drawn music in her voice hoarse voice and harsh laughter gauze hood, pearl stomacher and pin slashed sleeves oval, heavy-lidded eyes pallid, thin-lipped moist, wine-dashed lips

According to Fauconnier (1994; 1997), there is a space mapping in human cognition progress written as a formula:

$$B=F(a)$$

“B” is what we think the object, while “a” is the object itself. “F” is the bridge for “a” and “B”, and it depends on how “a” will be transformed and what “B” will be. Additionally, “F” in human’s daily life is accumulated everyday in every event and affair. It also can be decided by humans’ genes directions. Therefore, “a” is the real women living in Oscar Wilde’s life. “B” is what he wrote and expressed in his novels and plays. We thus can deduce he seldom put his eyes on women, any women; therefore, he was in a kind of straitened circumstances when he depicted women. The detailed description on males revealed his sexual orientation that he observed so carefully on the “eyes, eyebrows, noses, lips, hairs” and so on. Reading these words would give you a feeling as if you touched the characters. But you never

have the same kind of sense on his women characters. You have to arouse your imagination because women were all “XX-like”. His “input” had an impact to his “output”, and that is how “a” influences “B”.

B. *The Evaluation on Women and Men Characters*

Oscar Wilde always found a representative to express his extraordinary understanding on the life in many of his plays. A dandy-like man usually talked about life, politics, philanthropy, and classes. When it goes to love, weddings, marriages, and families, a “women” would be adopted. The narration usually has little connection with the development of the plots but only critics from the overall situation.

As we aforementioned, the women characters are the reflections of his observation in his daily life or his imagination during his creation. Let’s see some examples below:

“No woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly.” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

“Wicked women bother one. Good women bore one. This is the only difference between them.” (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*)

“How you women war against each other!”

“But women who have common sense are curiously plain, father, aren’t they? Of course I only speak from hearsay.

No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex.” (*An Ideal Husband*)

Additionally, Oscar Wilde preferred to show women’s indifferent, hypocritical and oversensitive characteristics.

Women characters always play the keys to promote the entire plot but they are not always the heroin of his story. Women characters are usually introduced by men characters, which can be given rise to the length or space in his books for women characters. When he arranged to show the personality of any women, it is not shown clearly by the women themselves, but men characters have to be lent. Here are some examples.

In *Salome*, it is obvious that the princess Salome is the focus. Her beauty was repeated over and over again by a young Syrian soldier, the Cappadocian and Herod Antipas. The Salome seems to hide behind so that we can only catch her through the eyes of men. Also, her cruelty, coldness and craziness are shown in Iokanaan’s lines.

In *An Ideal Husband*, it is Lord Goring who first gave a definition to Ms. Cheverly as “a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night”². Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern are the ones who first tie the knot and at last solve the problem. Mable Chiltern’s beauty and smartness have to be shown in her self-willed attitudes towards the proposals from Tommy Trafford. Ms. Cheverly’s crafty was shown in the negotiation with Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sybil’s innocent and charming personality is shown through Dorian’s sight. In Chapter three, there’s a big party for the rich middle-class and aristocratic. Many women characters are introduced from the sight of Lord Henry and narrated with his ironic tones.

However, also in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *An Ideal Husband*, there are paragraphs which directly tell the exact movement and thinking process of men characters such as Dorian Gray and Lord Goring.

For all, Readers can get acknowledge of these women characters through the eyes and words of men characters. This estrangement between readers and women characters is set by the author, which shows there is a piece of glass wall between the author and the women, too. The result is men characters are easily to be touched by the readers while women characters only could be hardly peered through the eyes or speeches of men characters.

IV. CONCLUSION

As analyzed all above, Oscar Wilde owns a sense of indifference to women characters for he usually use indirect ways when describing them. This general and indirect way seems to put women behind a wall so that they are untouchable. This gives rise to Oscar Wilde’s inadvertent observation on women. Oppositely, men characters are always “touchable”, which results from very careful watch on them; otherwise.

The phenomena indicate the author’s gender awareness which can be adopted by Wilde from the so-called homosexual life. In addition, the sexual orientation can be influenced in other ways, such as his education background, but whether Oscar Wilde is a gay person cannot be defined through all of these that are only reflection of his gender awareness.

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² Oscar Wilde: *An Ideal Husband*. Page 600. Line 10. Wordsworth Editions Limited. Hertfordshire: the Great Britain.

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Yingyi Li was born in 1993. She is an undergraduate student of China Agricultural University, majored in English.

Li Yi was born in 1971, got her PhD in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from the Minzu University of China. Now she is an associate professor in the College of Humanity and Development Studies in China Agricultural University. Her research mainly focused on phonetics and phonology. Oscar Wilde is also her interest.