

The cleverness and wisdom of women in oscar wilde's writing (salome and lady wind...

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A Woman's Wisdom

Cleverness and wisdom has always worked hand in hand, especially during the times of aristocratic England. However, it was mostly only men who were able to learn the arts of philosophy and speak their minds on it without being discarded, while the women, in most cases, were just put to the side when it came to such matters. Wilde criticizes this patriarchal practice using both the characters and symbols in *Salome* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, by showing that women can be just as clever, or even more wise, than their male counterparts.

Within *Salome*, references to the moon are spoken throughout the story, mostly in direct reference to Salome herself, which both the guys and girls have their own thoughts on. Amongst the men, they mostly admire the moon according to their person. For Herod, he calls the moon “ a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers” and “ reels through the clouds like a drunken woman” (311). But the Young Syrian does not talk about the moon specifically, but directly about Salome, saying she’s “ like a princess who has little white doves for feet” (301) and “ like the shadow of a white rose” (302). However, the women speak about the moon in a completely different light. They call the moon “ is like the moon, that is all” (312), a dangerous omen of death and tragedy, “ cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin” (304), and someone looking for dead things to collect. To me this could represent that while the men are too moonstruck over the mere beauty of Salome, the women see through the appearance and know the dangerous intentions and well-knowing mind that Salome has.

One of the characters who talks the most about the moon is The Page of Herodias. She constantly warns the Young Syrian about looking at Salome for too long, saying that it'll cause something horrible to happen, knowing how deceiving Salome is, especially with the Young Syrian's obsession with her. Even when Salome is in the room with these two, The Page of Herodias warns of the moon searching for something to cover itself, most likely referencing Salome's influence on her brother. Yet when the Young Syrian kills himself, she doesn't blame Salome for her cruel trickery, but instead she blames herself for not being able to protect him, saying " if I had hidden him in a cavern she would not have seen him" (310). To me, it seems to me that one of the reasons she blames herself is not solely on the fact that she didn't protect him from Salome, but because she assumed that he would know well enough not to be so entranced by Salome's appearance and sweet words, but with the Young Syrian's death proving her incorrect in that assumption, that also feels responsible because she didn't help him learn that appearances can hide a deadly mind.

Salome and her mother could be considered the most dangerous as well as the most clever characters in this play. Salome uses her beauty and the lust that men have for her to get them to do what she wants, one of the more notable victims of her is the Young Syrian. Though the guards constantly tell Salome that no one is allowed to see Iokanaan, she uses Syrian's infatuation to speak to the guards in her stead, promising him that she would " fall for thee a flower, a little green flower" (306), which I believe to be an innuendo for a special night between the two. Later on, when we meet Herod and Herodias, Herod asks Salome to dance for her, offering to grant a request of

hers. When both Herodias and Salome deny Herod the dance, playing on both his ego and his lust for Salome, Herod swears to all of those there that he will grant anything Salome wants. Once Salome agrees and dances for Herod, she requests the head of Iokanaan, to the joy of her mother, and Herod reluctantly agrees to the request, bringing the head for Salome and her mother's own ulterior motives.

But if Salome is so clever, how did she descend into her mad attraction towards Iokanaan? Well, some might say that wisdom can eventually lead to madness, like in many dark tales. But I don't think madness is too involved in this, but rather it's her getting a bit too curious and overwhelmed by the appearance of Iokanaan. Much like when an archeologist or a scientist makes a brand new discovery, they want to know everything about it, to fully understand it. However it is very strange that each time Iokanaan refuses to let Salome touch one part of his body, she immediately goes to one after the other, until she finally settles for his lips. This is probably because the other pieces of Iokanaan's body she lists off, he refutes her by saying that it'll corrupt those parts with her evilness. But when Salome mentions the lips, he does not say that they'll be corrupted, but just tells her to back away. I think that because Iokanaan did not say to her that it will corrupt him, it's the thing she wanted to experience the most, so that she could still touch him and still keep him pure.

Mrs. Erlynne could be considered a character of deception, not revealing who she really is to Lord Windermere through most of the play, tricking him out of a lot of money under her false name, and never mentioning her real name to

Lord Augustus as well. However, unlike the characters in *Salome*, the deceptions that Erlynne commits don't have too much malicious intent behind them. At the party she gets along with a lot of people, despite most of the aristocratic women loathing her because she became friends with a lot of gentlemen in London. She seems to hold herself in very high regard, perhaps using the mannerisms she had before she was abandoned to try to make friends with the other partygoers. Even at the party she mostly talks to the men at the party, trying to use her new name as a means to get remarried much faster than if she still used her old name. But when she's eventually caught in her lies by Lord Windermere, she admits that she was deceiving everyone, especially him, out of money to help rebuild her life. Even with Lord Windermere's harsh words towards Mrs. Erlynne, she never tries to completely undermine him, but simply speaks her own mind and recalls thoughts of after she abandoned her daughter, that "for twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless, — I want to live childless still" (382). She even tries to convince Lord Windermere to not tell his wife the truth about her identity, threatening to degrade her name even more than she had already, out of the love of her daughter. Using her wisdom to deceive people is more of just trying to get a second chance with her life, trying to atone to herself the mistakes she made, abandoning her own child after she herself was abandoned by the one she loved, and to have a real loving life after having her old name shunned by the majority of society.

Margaret's fan could be a symbol of her ever-growing wisdom throughout the story. At first Lady Windermere seems a bit naïve, taking things too seriously and being very cut and dry when discussing with Lord Darlington.

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She almost seems to be living in her own fairy tale when she speaks about life, calling it “ a sacrament. Its ideal is Love. Its purification is sacrifice” (336), and gets very defensive when others disagree on her stand points. Then when she first talk with Berwick, Lady Windermere starts to believe all of the assumptions and gossip that Berwick tells her. However, once she runs away to Lord Darlington’s house we get a turning point on how Margaret acts. Mrs. Erlynne talks with Lady Windermere to try and convince her that what she thought about Lord Windermere and Erlynne is wrong, but Margaret denies all that she says, finding any reason to distrust her, believing in what only she thinks to be true. But as Erlynne pleads to Margaret to not throw her life away just because of her, and explains why Lord Windermere and her kept their friendship as long as it has. That’s when Margaret started to mature and gain more wisdom, not from any teaching or philosophical books, but Lady Windermere learned from not only her mistake, but the mistakes of her mother. The scene that really sets this in is in the beginning of the fourth act, when Lady Windermere first wakes up. She monologues to herself about the events last night and realizes that there’s “ a bitter irony in the way we talk of good and bad women” and that “ Words are perhaps the worst. Words are merciless” (376), showing that even the most tragic of times can bring about strong wisdom, especially from people we may not expect to have it.

But couldn’t Lady Windermere just be worried about the relationship with her husband instead of her being furious at Mrs. Erlynne because she lacks the wisdom to see through Berwick’s gossip? To me, not only because she seeks out her husband’s checkbook on the recommendation of Berwick, but the

reaction she has once it's revealed that Lord Windermere is giving money to Erlynne is childish. She is constantly telling her husband that she doesn't want Mrs. Erlynne at her party, but each time she is denied by Lord Windermere, she gets increasingly upset to the point of threatening to hit her with the fan her husband gave her. Even after her encounter with Lord Darlington, she writes a letter to her husband and runs away from her home to Darlington's house, the equivalent of a child stomping to their room and slamming the door.