

The presentation of women in our country's good



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1787, women were marginalized members of society, an underclass not able to enjoy the same liberties as men. Combined with some of the abject poverty plaguing England at the time, the result is some of the female characterization in *Our Country's Good*. The representation of these women criminals, as well as the other women, is telling of the characters' beliefs and the situation that determines their lives.

The most striking aspect that dominates the presentation of women is their role sexually. We can plainly see the men's views of women from the men's dialogue. John Wisehammer exclaims; "at night what is there to do but seek English cunt. Warm, moist, soft, o the comfort of the lick". This fixation on the woman's vagina is an objectifying sexualization of women, presenting them as none other than sex objects to the male need. While a 20th/21st century reader knows better than to reduce women down to their "crannies and crooks", a statement such as this displays how women are seen in 1787, and should be in the back of the mind of the reader when evaluating men's actions towards women in the play. Wertebaker's decision to include this sexist exposition at the very start of the play is used to shock audiences, and sets a precedent that will not be forgotten. This tactic reflects the blatant repression of women of the time that would shock modern observers equally.

However, later on in the passage, John Wisehammer continues; "Alone, frightened in this stinking hole of hell, take me inside you whoever you are. Take me, my comfort." Apart from the very obvious sexual undertones, this quotation shows a man's need for female accompaniment. This description is almost metaphorical of being inside a mother's womb, and therefore an almost Freudian state of mind can be seen in the men of the 18th century.

Women are seen as the care-givers and comforters of the world, and men such as John Wisehammer, who have been reduced to stealing in the harsh poverty of Georgian England and find themselves exiled to a foreign land, may mistake this comfort for a sexual need. This aspect of how the characters think gives a complexity to Wisehammer's exposition, and presents the underlying, deep, emotional need that women satisfy.

There is, nonetheless, a cognitive dissonance in the men's projections of women. Despite the fixation on their sexuality, the men continually convey their disapproval of sexual women. "But how could a whore play Lady Jane" - a line said by Ralph in Scene Four, seems to imply that these whores, a derogatory term for sexually-active women, somehow constitute an underclass of woman. This paradoxical philosophy of man presents women in a position in which they cannot win in a man's world, and therefore portrays their plight as hopeless, garnering more empathy for them in the play, and making their achievements even more rewarding.

This degradation of women thus far is called into contrast at the start of scene four, when Ralph Clark muses to himself about how he longs for his wife, Alicia. Using language such as "Dreamt, my beloved Alicia...kissed your dear beloved image a thousand times." Wertebaker proceeds, through the comparisons with how women are described previously, to put Alicia on a pedestal, and to show to the audience that she is greater than the whores and thieves we have seen so far. This rhetoric displays that women could be presented in a good light in 1787, as symbols of mutual love, not just sexual need, and adds a new dynamic to the female form in the play. However, when compared with some of Ralph's other statements (such as when he <https://assignbuster.com/the-presentation-of-women-in-our-countrys-good/>

describes the, in his mind, justified flogging of Elizabeth) this statement brings back the harsh reality of women's plight. When the reader considers that this goddess-like symbol of love and equality and respect is thousands of miles away, the reader can readily see that this mind-set towards women is unrealistic and almost a fantasy, since Alicia is a fantasy for Ralph. Whilst all this contributes to the idea that women have a lasting impact on men emotionally, as we have seen in John Wisehammer and now separately in Ralph, we notice that women are not an underclass, despite how they may be overtly presented, but a necessary ingredient in any fulfilling form of society.

Often, the play seems to exploit and highlight women's sexualities as a prominent theme, yet a theme that entails a hypocrisy specific to the historical context - for instance, with Clark condemning women as whores despite their institutionalized sexualization. Despite this, however, the audience should not be fooled into thinking that Wertebaker is simply setting the scene through such blatant sexism and almost paradoxical events. Rather, *Our Country's Good* highlights the plight of women, as the sexism is combined with the obvious hellish conditions of transportation and Australia life. This play even cleverly puts women above the men, as their achievements and high spirits are a triumph, and a victory.