

# A Study on the Costumes of Oscar Wilde's Comedy

## -Focusing on *Lady Windermere's Fan*-

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Oscar Wilde, one of the quintessential authors in the late nineteenth century, was famous for his aestheticism and was associated with the costume of the dandy. I have already studied *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, so I will study the costumes used in his comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* and the relation between the characters and their costumes, examining magazine articles, photographs and illustrations.

### 1. *Lady Windermere's Fan*

*Lady Windermere's Fan* was presented on 20 February 1892, at George Alexander's St. James's Theatre. This comedy was well received by the audience.

The plot is as follows.

Lady Windermere is happily married and has a child, but she is surprised by the rumor of the relation between her husband and Mrs. Erlynne. She examines a book and finds a remittance for Mrs. Erlynne and she questions her husband about this money. She doesn't know that Mrs. Erlynne is in fact her mother who extorted the money from her husband.

Mrs. Erlynne is invited to Lady Windermere's birthday party and everyone in the party is attracted to her. As Lady Windermere has become distrustful of her husband, she goes to the rooms of Lord Darington who has proposed to her. Mrs. Erlynne knows that her daughter is going to commit the same fault as her and she persuades her daughter to change her mind. Mrs. Erlynne sacrifices herself to allow her daughter to escape from the rooms, she pretends to mistake her daughter's fan for her own.

The next day, keeping the secret between them, Mrs. Erlynne leaves for a foreign country with her fiancé, bringing with her a photograph of her daughter and grandson.

In the comedy, it describes with the fan the psychology between Lady Windermere who thinks morals are important and Mrs. Erlynne who ignores them and takes a provocative attitude.

### 2. Characters' features and costumes

#### 1) Lady Windermere

She has "something of the Puritan", and her aunt taught her what the world was forgetting; the difference that there was between what was right and what was wrong. She says "You look

on me as being behind the age. Well I am! I should be sorry to be on the same level as an age like this.”

She tells Lord Darington at the time of afternoon tea, when she is arranging roses in a blue bowl. After that, Duchess Berwick comes and says “How sweet you’re looking! Where *do* you get your gowns?”

After Lady Windermere reluctantly agreed to invite Mrs. Erlynne, Dumby says that she has that uncommon thing called common sense.

In the evening, Lady Windermere wears a dress which is décolleté and tight silhouette with very short sleeves. The skirt has ornaments at the hem with a long trail. She also wears long gloves reaching to the elbow and a choker.

In Act IV, she wears a short Russian coat of mushroom velvet.

## 2) Mrs. Erlynne

Mrs. Erlynne appears at the party “very beautifully dressed and very dignified.” And Lady Windermere “clutches at her fan, then lets it drop on the floor.”

Mrs. Erlynne’s dress is made of white satin, with many frills around the neckline, and there are many roses on the skirt. She has a bouquet of roses in one hand. In Act III, she wears a long opera cloak over the dress. The cloak is made of black satin brocaded with gold feathers and lined with pink bengaline. In Act IV, she wears like Lady Windermere a smart mushroom-brown overdress, Russian jacket braided in the Husser manner and a bonnet.

Mrs. Erlynne says “I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most. Twenty-nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not.” And she adds “I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn’t suit me. Somehow it doesn’t go with modern dress. It makes one look old.”

She says furthermore “What consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker.” It is important to her that she wears a modern dress in fashion, and she is always twenty-nine or thirty. Wilde says that to wear a modern dress is a “Pleasure” and I think these dresses express well the character of Mrs. Erlynne.

## 3) Men

Lord Windermere obeys the demands of Mrs. Erlynne to protect his wife. Cecil Gream says “Windermere knows that nothing looks so like innocence as an indiscretion.” Lord Windermere is a man who has common sense and acts in accordance with the society of the time.

On the other hand, Lord Darington who seduces Lady Windermere says “it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad... If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn’t.” He always poses as a dandy.

And when Lord Darington describes Lady Windermere; “She is the only good woman I have

ever met in my life.” and “This woman has purity and innocence”, Cecil Greem says “what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective.” Cecil Greem is described as a young dandy.

All men wear black evening coats, white shirts, white ties and waistcoats. These costumes contrast with women’s colourful dresses.

### **3. Conclusion--the meaning of the fan**

In this comedy, the fan represents particular feelings in several cases. The fan is a birthday present for Lady Windermere from her husband says “a wife should trust her husband!”, she says “Lord Darington, will you give me back my fan please? Thanks.... A useful thing a fan, isn’t it?... I want a friend to -night,” and she is given it back.

Next, when Mrs. Erlynne enters, “She clutches at her fan, then lets it drop on the floor.” Furthermore, she loses her fan in the room of Lord Darington, but Mrs. Erlynne hides the evidence of her arrival saying that she took Lady Windermere’s fan in mistake for her own.

Finally, the fan is given to Mrs. Erlynne, she carries it happily as a reminder of her daughter.

As mentioned above, the fan is not only an accessory but a useful tool which represents the sentiment of the owner. Lady Windermere represents her feelings to hand over the fan ignoring her husband, She calls a fan “a useful thing”, and she makes good use of a fan to show indirectly her intention.

When Mrs. Erlynne enters the party, she says to Lord Augustus who will marry her, “you shall hold my bouquet.” And in the last scene, she also says “Won’t you carry the fan, Lord Augustus?” He answers “If you really desire it.” She adds “Of course I do. You’ll carry it so gracefully. You would carry off anything gracefully, Lord Augustus.” It means that she is going to accept his proposal by allowing him to carry the fan.

I can conclude that Wilde uses the fan as a tool which express the feelings of the characters and intends to suggest the significance of the same Christian name of daughter and mother by the use of the fan in the play.