

ПОЭТИКА ЗАРУБЕЖНОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ



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THE STRUCTURE AND IMPLICATIONS OF O. WILDE'S COMEDY "LADY WIDERMERE'S FAN"

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Abstract. The article analyzes O. Wilde's comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* from the point of view of its semantic component, substantiates its semantic and formal belonging to the "new drama" of the late 19th century; and presents a number of problems connected with the author's individual ideas and his philosophy of the unreal. The research methods used are determined by the integrated approach to the study of Wilde's play, which allowed using biographical, cultural-historical, and hermeneutic methods. The authors consider *Lady Windermere's Fan* in the context of the leading productions of that period and study its sources which are found in ancient comedies, contemporary Irish plays, popular melodramas, and problematic dramas by Henrik Ibsen and Wilde's countrymen. Comparison with the reputed plays of the predecessors and the contemporaries makes it possible to highlight the originality of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, to determine how, within the framework of a well-known plot, the writer presents the ambiguity of the problem of female sin and the absurdity of the laws of society. The urgent social issues are related to the external action of the comedy. Following the traditions of the "new drama", the writer reveals the most important problems within the framework of the inner action: the theme of love and trust in one's own heart. Wilde's philosophy of the unreal is determined by the theme of the power of irrational forces, such as chance and love, over the person. Stereotyped thoughts and actions lead the characters to misfortune: distrust of her husband makes Lady Windermere worry and take wrong decisions. Special attention is paid to the image of the fan, which is connected with the main elements of the plot. The fan becomes a symbol of discord in the comedy. The article discusses the complex nature of Wilde's interpretation of the relationship between the mother and the child. The writer was among the first to rethink women's social roles; he declares that motherhood is not an obligatory female duty and anticipates this problem in the drama of the twentieth century. At the same time, the comedy contains an idea that the presence of a woman can be dangerous for the freedom and independence of a man. The article suggests options for reading the finale of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in the context of the philosophy of the unreal or the theme of art. The materials of the article can be used in the practical teaching of the university course of the history of foreign literature.

Keywords: new drama; comedy; philosophy of the unreal; chance; art; O. Wilde; M. Carr

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СТРУКТУРА И СМЫСЛЫ КОМЕДИИ О. УАЙЛЬДА «ВЕЕР ЛЕДИ УИНДЕРМИР»

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Аннотация. В статье проанализирована комедия О. Уайльда «Веер леди Уиндермир» с точки зрения ее смысловой составляющей, обоснована ее содержательная и формальная принадлежность к «новой драме» конца XIX века, представлен ряд проблем, обусловленных индивидуально-авторскими взглядами, его философией нереального. В основе методологии исследования лежит комплексный подход к изучению пьесы Уайльда, позволивший применить биографический, культурно-исторический, герменевтический методы. «Веер леди Уиндермир» рассматривается в контексте ведущих постановок, изучаются ее истоки, которые видятся в античных комедиях, в современных ирландских пьесах, популярных мелодрамах, проблемных драмах Г. Ибсена и уайльдовских соотечественников. Сопоставление с известными пьесами предшественников и современников позволяет ярче увидеть самобытность комедии «Веер леди Уиндермир», определить, как в рамках

расхожего сюжета писатель представляет «женский вопрос», неоднозначность проблемы греха, абсурдность законов общества. Актуальные социальные вопросы связаны с внешним действием комедии. В традициях «новой драмы» наиболее важные темы писатель представляет в рамках внутреннего действия: тема любви, доверия своему сердцу. Уайльдовская философия нереального определяется темой власти над человеком иррациональных сил, таких как случайность, любовь. Шаблонные мысли и действия приводят героев к несчастью: недоверие к мужу заставляет леди Уиндермир переживать и принимать ошибочные решения. Особое внимание уделяется образу веера, с которым связаны основные элементы сюжета. Веер становится в произведении символом раздора. В статье обсуждается проблема неоднозначности прочтения взаимоотношений матери и ребенка в уайльдовском восприятии. Одним из первых писатель переосмысливает женские роли в обществе, заявляет, что материнство – не обязательный удел женщины и предвосхищает эту проблему в драматургии XX века. Одновременно в комедии содержится мысль об опасности женщины для свободы и самостоятельности мужчины. В статье предлагаются варианты прочтения финала «Веера леди Уиндермир» в контексте философии нереального или темы искусства. Материалы статьи могут быть использованы в практике преподавания истории зарубежной литературы в вузе.

Ключевые слова: новая драма; комедия; философия нереального; случайность; искусство; О. Уайльд; М. Карр

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Introduction. Statement of the problem. Theoretical framework

It is apparent and natural why Oscar Wilde turned to the comedy genre: the writer, famous for his wit, could not help but become a comedy dramatist. At the time of the release of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1892, already staged tragedies *Vera, or the Nihilists*, 1880, and *The Duchess of Padua*, 1883, added neither to the writer's fame, nor fortune. The tragedies were first run in New York (*Vera, or the Nihilists* in August 1883, and *The Duchess of Padua* titled *Guido Ferranti* in January 1891), and both performances quickly left the stage. *Lady Windermere's Fan* was the first comedy that brought him fame, it was presented to the public on February 20 at St. James's Theatre, directed by George Alexander.

An objective interpretation of the play can be expected only nowadays, when the passions over Wilde's name have calmed down, and over a century's studies of his comedies make it possible to see the system-forming elements of the writer's artistic world. The purpose of this work is to present a set of themes and ideas of the comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan*, associated with Wilde's philosophy of the unreal.

In general, Wilde's comedy is considered in the context of the "new drama" of the last third of the 19th century. The article involves letters, theoretical works of the writer, studies of foreign and domestic biographers, literary historians and critics. The research methodology is based on an integrated approach to the study of Wilde's play employing biographical, cultural-historical, hermeneutic methods.

Origins of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Critics of Victorian England did not see, or did not want to notice the writer's innovation, searched and found the origins of comedy in popular contemporary and earlier works. S. Eltis notes that "rather than seeking to conceal his borrowings, Wilde seems to have presented the critics with a challenge to name as many sources as possible, a challenge to which they rose" [Eltis 1996: 59]. There were obvious references to the popular plays *Odette* (1881) by Victorien Sardou, *Francillon* (1887) by Alexandre Dumas-son, some scenes were read as a citation of *School for Scandal* (1777) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (1849) by Eugene Scribe. The episode with a woman in the

bachelor's room could remind the spectator of the play *The Idler*, by Charles Haddon Chambers, which was staged not long before. Critics interpreted the connection between *Lady Windermere's Fan* and other dramas by the fact that Wilde, an aspiring playwright, carefully imitated formulas that had already proved their success [Eltis 1996: 59; Chesnokova 2023: 51].

S. Eltis also speaks about the influence of the popular Irish playwright, a friend of the Wildes, Dionysius Lardner Boucicault (1820–1890), "whose Irish plays were a hit in Dublin long before Wilde left for Oxford". In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the writer imitated the scandalous denouement of Boucicault's play *Formosa; or The Railroad to Ruin* (1869), in which a loving but not too bright aristocrat marries an elegantly restrained fallen woman [Eltis 2017: 284]. Fortunato highlights melodramas *Illusion* by Pierre Leclercq (1890) and *Lord Jonnerly: A Romantic Drama* by Mark Quinton and Henry Hamilton (1890) among Wilde's contemporary plays [Fortunato 2007: 135].

A number of researchers believe that Wilde's comedies are genetically related to antiquity, and this is a fair reasoning, the role of Ancient Greek culture in the formation of his worldview is significant and undeniable. Thus, Hanson believes that "Wilde's comedies certainly put him in the tradition of Aristophanes' parody and satire", it is known that Wilde published a translation of the chorus of cloud maidens from Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds* in the Dublin University magazine in 1875 [Hanson 2012: 488]. Serena Witzke, who states New Comedy as his source, writes in her article "An Influence of No Importance? New Comedy in Oscar Wilde's Society Plays" that Wilde "favored the refinement of Terence over the riotous spectacles of Plautus". The researcher believes that *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a variation of Terence's comedy *Mother-in-Law* [Witzke 2010].

Wilde certainly knew the serious drama of his day. Henrik Ibsen was first presented in England in 1889 with the play *A Doll's House*, Gerhard Hauptmann's play *Before Sunrise* appeared in 1890. April 20, 1891 was the first night of *Hedda Gabler* by H. Ibsen. H. Markovitch in her work "Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory" writes that "Wilde saw this play at least twice in 1891. Elizabeth Robins as Hedda was, in his opinion, "a real masterpiece of art"

[Marcovitch 2010: 152]. Elizabeth Robins, an American actress who moved to London and became interested in Ibsen's work, considered Wilde her generous guide who took her through theatrical shoals [Powell 1994: 220]. Probably, taking care of Elizabeth Robins, who staged *Hedda Gabler* together with Marion Lea, did not presuppose critical comments. Thus, in a letter to Ethel Greenfell in April 1891, Wilde reported about spectators' low spirits caused by second-hand furniture for the scenery [Powell 1994: 227]. P. Fortunato gives Wilde's response to an offer to watch Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, where he recommends that they instead go to Henry Jones's *The Dancing Girl*. In general, Fortunato notes Wilde's lack of interest in Ibsen and his tendency to belittle Ibsen [Fortunato 2007: 103].

The works of Arthur Pinero, and especially Henry Arthur Jones, his British contemporary playwrights, who turned to urgent topics, also did not inspire the writer either from ideological or artistic points of view. This was noted by contemporaries, for example, Bernard Shaw [Shaw 1963: 140] and was evident in the works of Wilde himself. In a letter to George Alexander in October 1894, he wrote that he knew and loved Pinero's works, but did not accept Jones', and a few years earlier in the essay "The Critic as an Artist" (1890) we find his remark that a real critic should not waste his faculty of contemplation on subjects as insignificant as "Mr. Lewis Morris's poems, Mr. Ohnet's novels, or the plays of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones" [Wilde 1997: 983].

The plays of Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Pinero present the type of a woman who changed her attitude to marriage, who realized her social role, who in some way borrows a man's way of life – all this became the realities of the late 19th century. Wilde listens to the trends of the time keenly and in his comedies cover the problem of marriage, the problem of "a woman with a past", the issue of the "price" for "a woman with a past" to enter the society, improper behavior of men in marriage, unequal rights and opportunities of men and women, etc., but these topics fit into a broader context of his philosophy, which we will discuss in more detail below.

Wilde's original interpretation of the theme of society and the "women issue" in the comedy

In *Fan*, the young Lady Windermere suspected her husband of having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne, a woman with a nearly notorious reputation, but was saved by her from a thoughtless step of leaving the family. The plot of the play is largely based on the fact that Mrs. Erlynne is the mother of Lady Windermere, who left her daughter in infancy. The story of an orphan meeting his mother has been popular since antiquity, and the theme of a woman leaving her child flourished like never before in the 19th century, because in different variations it discussed the topical issue of changing the woman's position in society.

Back in the fifties of the 19th century, the plot about the virtues of a fallen woman was dangerous for playwrights. For example, A. Dumas-son's play *The Lady of the Camellias* "was refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain when it was presented in an English translation under the title *Camilla* for presentation at

the Drury Lane Theater in 1853. It remained officially banned for another twenty years. One of its most controversial aspects was the fact that the courtesan was portrayed as capable of genuine love and selflessness" [Eltis 1996 :61]. In the 90s, the situation changed and such a plot was in demand, although partly disapproved.

S. Eltis argues with critics who point to the traditional nature of the plot in Wilde's play, and notes its prominence as it "challenges conventional ideas of the good and bad woman, while the apparently idle chatter of Wilde's dandies develops and questions accepted notions of virtue and vice" [Eltis 1996: 89]. The comedy makes you think about the lack of strict standards in assessing a human, and here Bristow notes: "Since it is 'illusions' that lead Wilde's heroine to label the adventuress who saved her as a 'very good woman,' it remains unclear which of the two is supposed to be valued most highly. The play is far from explicit about who, indeed, is the 'good woman' being honoured in its subtitle" [Bristow 1994: 59]. The theme of sin in Wilde's works is one of the central, the writer often argued with the cardboard Victorian idea of guilt, apostasy, often justifying his heroes. In *The Critic as Artist* the writer argued that the sin is "an essential element of progress" [Wilde 1997: 979]. Wilde's idea of the role of sin in the personal and social development is analyzed in detail in Ch. Nassaar's monograph "Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Study by Oscar Wilde" [Nassaar 1974].

A number of foreign and Russian researchers consider the *Fan* a social comedy [Bird 1977: 111; Mackie 2009: 157; Obraztsova 2001: 201]. The works devoted to the society in the *Fan* contain many interesting remarks concerning the role of men, women or all taken together; general patterns of social life. In a number of scenes, the influence of ladies is noted, for example, it is obvious that Lord Windermere can give Mrs. Erlynne money, but only his wife is able to restore her position in society [Sinfield 1994: 42]. A. Sinfield also speaks about Wilde's disapproval of public relations. He writes that Lady Windermere's idea that her moral foundations are of some importance is an illusion, the comedy reveals the significance of a complex combination of money, social status and abilities. Mrs. Erlynne fails because she is moral, not because she is immoral. "Society – Sinfield writes – was organized not to maintain a fence around an established order, but to handle a chronic instability" [Sinfield 1994: 43].

The fact that society is bad in itself and produces a bad effect on a person is not Wilde's discovery. The vices of society are a reality to be reckoned with, but they are not, in our opinion, in the center of Wilde's comedies. Wilde, partly anticipating the existential interpretation, presents his contemporary society as the embodiment of the absurd, which is an integral part of life.

Analyzing the speech of the characters of the play, comedic course of actions, H. Marcovitch points to Wilde's dramatic vision of human existence in society: "The play, despite its moral ending of acceptance and reconciliation, ends up being an alienating universe, where people can only survive not by pretending to be someone who they are not, but by convincing them-

selves that a stereotype is an acceptable substitute for agency,” she writes [Marcovitch 2010: 161]. Thus, in the comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan*, most researchers single out the theme of society as the central one, as it is the most obvious one.

Reflection of comedy's topical issues in its structure. The image of the fan

The structure of the play meets Wilde's objectives to attract an audience of different intellectual levels. The construction of Wilde's plays in the traditions of the “new drama” includes external and internal actions, has external and internal conflicts. The external action of his comedies is due to the current social issues, focused on the broad audience. The inner action is connected with moral, aesthetic and philosophical issues.

Let's take a closer look at the external conflict of the comedy. Public opinion makes the heroine believe in her husband's infidelity. Considering the work from this point of view, we see that the beginning is the proposal of Darlington, who is in love with Lady Windermere, the culmination is the departure of Lady Windermere from home, the denouement is her return home. This is a typical dramatic plot of that time, based on the display of family relations, which was presented in the works of H. Ibsen (*A Doll's house*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, etc.), and in the plays of H. Jones, A. Pinero, as well as in the works of the French playwrights popular in England E. Scribe, V. Sardou, A. Dumas-son.

Less obvious, but more important themes are revealed by Wilde within the framework of an internal conflict, which is connected with the theme of love and the individual author's theme of trusting one's heart.

The idea of the play is deeper if judged from the point of view of Wilde's philosophy of the unreal. The concept of “philosophy of the unreal” is substantiated in the chapter of the monograph “The Philosophy of Oscar Wilde's Tragedies”, the article “Youth as a category of Wilde's philosophy of the unreal” [Valova, Reshetov 2023; Valova 2023]. In general, we mean the complex of Wilde's ideas about the power of various irrational forces over a person. The pillars of Wilde's philosophy of the unreal are categories of *trust*, *reason*, *soul*, *influence*, *voice*, *youth*. To use the term “category” for these phenomena was possible because in Wilde's artistic world they have system-forming properties that are uniform for all his texts.

In Wilde's plays, trust in the inner self or in a loved one, always saves; on the contrary, actions by a pattern give rise to distrust and lead to unhappiness. In Wilde's comedy, distrust of her husband leads a young woman to unpleasant experiences and wrong decisions that almost destroyed her life. This theme is deepened by the image of the fan.

It is interesting to watch how Wilde fills a scene from a popular play with symbolic meaning. The fan is an important object in “La Tosca” (1887) by V. Sardou. In “La Tosca”, the fan was left to the disgraced brother of Le Marquis Attavanti together with a woman's dress for escapement. Scarpia uses the fan to waken Tosca's jealousy and find out where her lover is hiding the

runaway Cesare Angelotti. In Act V, scene 2 Tosca wants to hit Marquess Attavanti with the fan.

N. V. Kotova, analyzing the titles of Wilde's works, discovers that the titles of the first and last comedies fall out of “the general nominative logic”, the title *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play About a Good Woman*, focuses on the fan, an object that will play an important role in the climactic scene” [Kotova 2022: 891]. Kotova makes a conclusion that the largest group of twelve titles out of thirty one analyzed are in possessive form. “The semantics of possessiveness is necessary as a means of strengthening the nominative function <...>”. Continuing the thought of J. Genette, Kotova writes about the emergence of additional nominative synergy: “being Ernest becomes important, the crime is attributed to Lord Arthur Savile, Lady Windermere's fan plays the key role in the denouement of the play” [Kotova 2022: 901]. However, it should be noted that the fan is much more than a fashionable accessory appearing in key scenes, it is a philosophical symbol peculiar to a number of dramatic texts of the writer.

A fan is a special detail to depict the characters; it is interesting to Wilde primarily because of its versatility: the fan can hide the face, it can be used to point to a person or object, “to play”, to hit, after all; it is an item of luxury and at the same time of convenience. It is also significant that this accessory is for women only.

Since ancient times, a fan has been viewed not only as a necessity or a luxury item. In Europe, fans were extremely popular in the 18th century, they were painted even by famous painters like F. Boucher and J. A. Watteau; there was a special “fan language”, which was used for flirting: one open leaf implied the possibility of friendship, two meant friendship in love, an open and sharply folded fan signaled about a date with a lady, etc. [Modern Encyclopedia 2002: 176], but this language practically lost its meaning in the 19th century.

A new surge of interest in fans arises just at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, now it is a sign of refined luxury. P. Fortunato considers it very indicative that Wilde introduced a very fashionable consumer product into the title of the play. The leading women's magazines of that time, as a rule, turned to theater critics on costumes, for example, “The Illustrated London News” published illustrations of dresses and huge fans from Wilde's play. (The fan of the main character consisted of sixteen ostrich feathers fixed with a tortoiseshell handle, with the name Margaret in diamonds [Fortunato 2007: 96]). Wilde's play could well contribute to the sale of such fans: for example, in the “Liberty and Co” catalogues of the 1890s, fans were almost the main article, and in 1894, after the release of the play, they offered seventeen types of ostrich feather fans.

The image of the fan interested researchers, as a rule, only in connection with Wilde's first comedy, but was not noticed in other plays. A. Bird considered it as “an indirect indictment of a heartless and mercenary society, of which the fan, an extravagant and useless toy, is so accurate a symbol” [Bird 1977: 112]. Quite a lot has been said about this accessory by A. Obratsova,

who believes that it is “able to change and direct the course of action”. The researcher shows the ambiguity of this object: “From a symbol of love and tenderness, beauty and wealth, the fan threatens to turn into a sign of infidelity and betrayal”. Obratsova also names other functions of the fan: “One wave of the fan, and Mrs. Erlynne feels a miracle inside herself: a previously unknown maternal feeling awakens in her”. “With ease and at the same time with a deep meaning implied by the author, the fan passes from hand to hand. Whether it is the characters playing with a fan, or it is the fan playing with people, imperiously administering their destinies” [Obratsova 2001: 198]. V. Lukov and N. Solomatina consider the fan to be a kind of a character, personifying family happiness at first. Then the fan becomes a symbol of revenge, later it is a sign of treason, and at the end of the comedy it symbolizes reconciliation [Lukov 2005: 34]. K. Nassaar studies the image of the fan in relation to the characters, and believes that the fan is a symbol of corruption for Lord Windermere [Nassaar 1974: 78]. Nassaar is one of the few researchers who paid attention to the fan as a characteristic detail, but he “saw” it only in *Salome*.

Although the fan was primarily associated with flirting in the perception of spectators and readers, in the context of Wilde’s works, the image of the fan is perceived as a symbol of discord¹. The possibility of such an interpretation is suggested by the first play “Vera, or the Nihilists”, where the word *fan* is used in the meaning “fire up”, “blow”: *VERA. I must. They are getting faint-hearted there, and I would fan the flame of this revolution into such a blaze that the eyes of all kings in Europe shall be blinded* [Wilde 1997: 374]. The negative content of this image is also indicated by Lady Windermere’s fleeting remark that a fan is a useful thing (in Wilde’s system of views, use is not a virtue): “*A useful thing a fan, isn’t it?*” [Wilde 1997: 502].

In Wilde’s first comedy the fan also acts as a symbol of discord, it is associated with the images of Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. The fan also helps to identify plot elements at the level of the internal conflict. Lady Windermere receives the fan as a birthday present from her husband, then this accessory nearly becomes a source of scandal, because the young woman almost insulted her guest (Lady Windermere planned to hit Mrs. Erlynne with it). This is the beginning of an internal conflict. The fan is first noticed by Darlington, and he mentions it twice, as if focusing on the object that practically causes a scandal. Lord Windermere was the second who speaks about it, practically at the same second he notices that his bank book has been opened and his wife has learned about transferring significant sums to Mrs. Erlynne. His wife promises to hit this dishonest lady in the face with the fan. Another fan appears in the hands of the Duchess of Berwick, it is her words that make Lady Windermere finally believe in the “guilt” of her husband. Restraining herself, the young woman drops the fan, asks Darlington to pick it up, and then it ap-

pears at the climax, it is found by Darlington’s guests, and Mrs. Erlynne admits that it is hers. In the end, the fan is gratefully handed over to Mrs. Erlynne (the denouement of the internal conflict), and thus quarrels and unnecessary suspicions leave the Windermers’ house.

Wilde also employs an accident in a new way, which in a “new drama” contributes to the resolution of the conflict and a happy end. The writer was scolded for piling up accidents in the comedy, but it is their quantity that is to draw the spectator’s attention to their another meaning.

In the comedy *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the mother saves her daughter from a rash step without meaning that. In her youth, Mrs. Erlynne left her family the same way following her feelings. In Wilde’s art world, as it can be seen from this example, the ability to feel gives a chance to get out of a difficult situation due to a sudden, logically unreasonable decision.

In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* accidents happen in situations that are fundamentally important for the characters. The theme of the accident appears in the remarks of the characters. Thus, Lord Windermere says that misfortunes “come from outside, they are accidents” [Wilde 1997: 496], but in the course of the action it turns out that peace and mutual understanding in the family are easily destroyed by public opinion, and saving happiness and love depends on a number of coincidences. First, Lady Windermere’s letter, that she is leaving home and her husband, falls into the hands of Mrs. Erlynne, who was not much ahead of Lord Windermere. These few minutes gave her the opportunity to read the letter and make a decision about saving her daughter from a rash step. Secondly, Lady Windermere’s fan was left on Lord Darlington’s sofa, where Cecil Graham noticed it. Mrs. Erlynne saved Lady Windermere again. Thirdly, in the finale of the comedy, Lady Windermere tries to tell her husband what happened to her, but as soon as she starts talking about the night’s incident, the butler enters and announces the arrival of Mrs. Erlynne.

The finale of the comedy obviously points to love as a feeling that can suggest the way to the truth. Coincidences emphasize that maternal love keeps the peace in the Windermers’ house, although Mrs. Erlynne did not take part in upbringing her daughter. It is her appearance “at the right moment in the right place” that saves the family from destruction.

Let us also pay attention to a different interpretation of the theme of motherhood in the *Fan*. H. Marcovitch considers Wilde’s comedies as a struggle against various kinds of stereotypes, both public and personal [Marcovitch 2010: 157]. K. Nassaar points to the fact that maternal love, like any real feeling, is not easy, brings a lot of suffering, whereas the new philosophy of the time is that it is not repentance that comforts, but pleasure [Nassaar 1995: 24]. So, one of the final scenes is very indicative, a conversation between Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne, who says: “I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don’t do

¹ Valova, O. M. (2016). Semantika veera v dramaturgii Oskara Uail'da [Semantics of the Fan in the Dramaturgy of Oscar Wilde]. In *Filologicheskii klass*. No. 2, pp. 84–89.

such things – not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate” [Wilde 1997: 527].

The writer was one of the first to draw attention to the problem that “motherhood is not for everyone”, which became topical in the twentieth century, he strongly emphasized the position of Mrs. Erlin, her “unrepentance”. In a letter to George Alexander in February 1892, Wilde noted that from a dramatic point of view, the last act belongs to her, that such a type has not been presented in literature yet.

In the twentieth century, the theme of women becomes one of the central in the drama of the Irish playwright Marina Carr (b. 1964). For example, a 30-year-old Portia (*Portia Coughlan*, 1996), with an apparently prosperous life, is extremely devastated, and one of the reasons is some kind of fear of her children. As Miriam Haughton writes, who studies in her article the motif of death in Carr’s plays, the playwright’s feminist voice can be revealed in her famous works such as *Midlands Trilogy: The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats* (1998). These works, Haughton notes, complicate and destroy traditional ideas about femininity and motherhood in Ireland [Haughton 2013: 72]. Motherhood was idealized by the Irish Catholic Church, notes Maresh, Irish society promoted the idea of a woman as a potential mother. Mothers who honor their sacred duties should be protected, but those who gave birth to children out of wedlock, of course, were not honored [Maresh 2016: 181]. Women who did not want to be mothers or were not ideal in their attitude to children were not considered the norm. In the 90-s of the twentieth century, women’s economic claims changed, whereas traditionally they were expected to remain primarily mothers. At this time, M. Carr appeals to readers and spectators with a request to finally understand that motherhood cannot be natural for all women. Marina Carr’s play, in which a mother of three children ends her life with a suicide, predictably leaves a heavy aftertaste. A century earlier, the Irishman Wilde presented the problem of motherhood burdening a woman and at the same time managed to create the image of Mrs. Erlynne who left her daughter, eliciting audience’s sympathy. In addition, a thoughtful spectator undoubtedly saw the parallels between Wilde’s heroine and Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, who also rethinks traditional female roles in society.

The plot of the play reveals the individual author’s idea of the function of a woman. According to Sarika Priyadarshini Bose, the bonds of the mother and the child (the play presents three types of mothers: the Duchess of Berwick, Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere herself) are the central theme of the play [Bose 1999: 98]. Developing this idea, the author of the dissertation comes to interesting conclusions about Wilde’s representation of the female principle. So, a woman needs the care of her mother or husband, she needs to work [Bose 1999: 101], it is noted that “Lady Windermere’s actions are foolish rather than noble or virtuous, despite the intentions she declares”, when the heroine loses sight of her support: the principles of virtue. This is another Wilde’s proof in favor of the lack of independence in women, the evil that lives in their nature.

The pointlessness of a woman from the leisure class made her an ornament for the man on whom she depended [Sinfield 1994: 42]. In the era of changing roles, a woman became the center of attention, and if she was treated patiently before, now she was seen full of vices. Some connected them with capitalism, the influence of the social atmosphere, others looked for the evil in the female nature. Wilde’s previous and subsequent dramatic works also contain the idea of a woman as a danger to a man, as a being depriving him of individualism.

Some researchers, for example, H. Marcovitch, see masculine features, dandy features in the image of Mrs. Erlynne [Marcovitch 2010: 156], because she is witty; she has doubts about moral obligations, but in the strict sense of this word, the heroine can only be considered approaching the male dandies.

Interpretation of the comedy’s finale

The earnest of the stated problems seems to resonate with the finale of the play: *Lady Windermere’s Fan* ends optimistically in every sense. The conflicts between Mrs. Erlynne and the Windermires are successfully resolved, Mrs. Erlynne herself agrees to become the wife of Lord Augustus, and thus her position in society will be ensured, and her reputation will change for the better. Modern researchers no longer accuse Wilde, as it happened before, of the primitive denouement. Thus, T. Chesnokova draws attention to Wilde’s conscious construction of an ending that disputes with traditional melodrama and serves, among other things, as a field for expressing his ideological position: “A happy end at the same time becomes almost the main goal of the author’s own game, within which the moral imperatives of forgiveness and retribution (as well as the characters themselves and the roles of the heroes) help to implement the formal scheme only so that the scheme eventually prevailed over them” [Chesnokova 2023: 52]. We feel that “marriage” outcome is illogical in some sense but at the same time appropriate for the comedy. In his plays, Wilde quite often uses a technique, for example, pointing only to the bad traits of the Duke of Padua (*The Duchess of Padua*, 1883) and not letting the spectator make a mistake in his characterization. The finale of this comedy obviously points to love (maternal, marital) as a feeling that can suggest the way to the truth.

The finale can also be considered within the framework of the theme of art. K. Nassaar considers *Lady Windermere’s Fan* as a new form for expressing the meanings of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where various characters represent the stages of the protagonist’s degradation. In addition, Nassaar points to Wilde’s vision of the society decline. From the beginning to the end of the play, Lord Windermere remains childishly innocent (as Dorian Gray was originally). In one scene, he accuses Mrs. Erlynne of moving away from the ideal depicted in the portrait which her daughter cherishes (“I wish that at the same time she would give you a miniature she kisses every night before she prays – It’s the miniature of a young innocent-looking girl with beautiful dark hair” [Wilde 1997: 527]). Through the prism of art, the destruction of the

world's harmony, according to Nassaar, becomes more obvious: "This miniature typifies the kind of art that D. G. Rossetti produced in the 1850s and that Basil Hallward created in the picture of Dorian before it began to change. The Victorians have drifted away from such art, however, towards Pater's *Mona Lisa*, decadence, and Dorian's picture after its corruption" [Nassaar 1995: 21]. This highlights the problem peculiar to Wilde's entire creative work: world degradation caused by a universal desire for pragmatism.

Conclusion

Studying the sources of the comedy *Fan* makes it possible to understand the depth of its content, since Wilde connects the "light" genre with traditions dating back to its origin, to antiquity, on the other hand, with the modern "new drama", which causes fierce disputes, and with popular plays that provide the author and the theater with financial stability. The writer's originality revealed in the fact that he employed popular forms to express his philosophical views, actual

problems of reality.

Most researchers believe that one way or another, Wilde's comedy is designed to expose a variety of drawbacks. The writer seems to have seen his task differently, we can recall his words from the letter to R. Clegg in the spring of 1891. Wilde said that the purpose of art is only to create a mood, it should neither teach nor influence actions. It is no accident that the comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* is devoid of didacticism, there are no traditional melodramatic "punishments" and "remorse". Revealing the actual problems of morals, lies, changes in the position of women in society in the external action, the author introduced in the internal action aesthetic and philosophical problems, presented his reasoning about the laws of being.

Lady Windermere's Fan only opens the door to the world of Wilde's comedies, and larger-scale conclusions are possible within the framework of a comprehensive analysis of the drama and the entire corpus of his texts.

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