

AN IDEAL HUSBAND

B Y O S C A R W I L D E

STUDENT MATINEES COMING SOON!

- **Nov. 29, 2011**
Beasley's
Christmas Party
- **Feb 7, 2012**
Tartuffe
- **Mar. 27 /Apr. 4**
Freud's
Last Session
- **May 22, 2012**
Leaving Iowa

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PLOT SUMMARY



Time Period: 1900

Setting: London

Sir Robert Chiltern is a prominent politician of impeccable moral character. His wife, Gertrude, idolizes him as the “ideal man” and believes that he has no faults.

Gertrude’s ideal is shattered when Mrs. Cheveley arrives in town. Mrs. Cheveley knows that at the beginning of his career Sir Robert gained his wealth and position by taking part in an illegal fraud. Mrs. Cheveley is blackmailing Sir Robert and threatening to expose him to the world.

Sir Robert cares less about losing his reputation than he does about losing

his wife’s love, but when Gertrude finds out his guilty secret she rejects him.

“It is not the perfect
but the imperfect who
have need of love.”

Sir Robert Chiltern

Lord Goring is Sir Robert’s best friend and is in love with Robert’s sister, Mabel Chiltern. Estranged from each other, both Robert and Gertrude turn to Lord Goring for help and advice.

It is up to Lord Goring to foil Mrs. Cheveley’s schemes, to help his friends see that love requires forgiveness, and to somehow convince Miss Mabel to marry him.

CHARACTERS

Sir Robert Chiltern — MP, House of Commons
Lady Chiltern (Gertrude) — his wife
Mabel Chiltern — his sister
Lord Goring — Sir Robert’s best friend
Lord Caversham — Lord Goring’s father
Mrs. Cheveley — newly arrived from Vienna

Mason — The Chiltern’s butler
Phipps — Lord Goring’s butler
Lady Markby — friend of Lady Chiltern
Lady Basildon — friend of Lady Chiltern
Mrs. Marchmont — friend of Lady Chiltern
Vicomte de Nanjac — with the French Embassy

WHO'S WHO



Arthur, Lord Goring



Miss Mabel Chiltern



Lady Chiltern (Gertrude)



Sir Robert Chiltern



Mrs Cheveley (Laura)

"To love oneself is
the beginning of a
life long romance"
~Lord Gor-

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Oscar Wilde's script gives detailed character descriptions for all this main characters. *If you were an actor—how would you use these descriptions to help you portray these characters?*

Lady Chiltern—a woman of serious purpose and "grave, Greek beauty."

Mabel Chiltern—"She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower...She has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence."

Sir Robert—"A personality of mark....intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note of his manner is that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride."

Mrs. Cheveley—"She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful."

Lord Goring—"A flawless dandy...He plays with life...He is fond of being misunderstood. It



THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE

Oscar Wilde's script describes a tapestry (depicting the painting of "The Triumph of Love" by Francios Boucher) that is displayed in the Chiltern's house. In a play about love triumphing over condemnation this was a highly symbolic piece of set decoration. *Look for the ways that Taproot set designer, Mark Lund has incorporated this painting into our set.*

("The Triumph of Venus" by Francios Boucher, 1740)

OSCAR WILDE TIMELINE

1854- Oscar Wilde was born on 16 October.

1855- The Wilde family moved to Merrion Square.

1856- His sister Isola was born.

1871- He enrolled in the Trinity College in Dublin.

1874- He went on to study at Oxford.

1878- He won the Newdigate prize for his poem.

1878- He receives his graduate degree with honors.

1878- Wilde left Ireland permanently and settled in England.

1881- His first collection of poems was published.

1882- Wilde toured America giving lectures on Aestheticism*. Afterwards he gave lectures in the UK about his American experience.

1884- He met Constance Lloyd and they married on 29 May.

1887- Worked as a reviewer for the Pall Mall Gazette.

1890- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published

1892- *Lady Windemere's Fan* was produced in London

1893- *A Woman of No Importance* was produced in London

1895- *An Ideal Husband* opened in London (Jan)



Oscar Wilde, 1882

1895- *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened in London (Feb)

1895- An enemy of Wilde's accused him of practicing homosexual acts. Wilde sued for libel. His first trial was scheduled for 3rd April.

1895- Wilde was convicted of homosexuality and sentenced to two years imprisonment.

1897- Wilde was released on 19 May.

1900- Oscar Wilde died of Meningitis on 30 November.

1905- His letters written in prison were published.

1954- His son Vyvyan penned his memoir *Son of Oscar Wilde*.

1962- *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* was published

*Aestheticism was a movement among writers and artists at the turn of the 19th century. It emphasized an ideal of beauty and believed that the goal of art was to give pleasure, not to serve any moral or didactic purpose.

OSCAR WILDE SAYS

Oscar Wilde is famous for the witty quotes from his stories and plays. Try doing an internet search for "Oscar Wilde quotes." Find your favorite saying. Here are some examples:

"Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it." ~*The Critic as Artist*

"The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future." ~*A Woman of No Importance*

"My own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's" ~*Lady Windermere's Fan*

"All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his." ~ *The Importance of Being Earnest*

"Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious." ~ *A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated*

THE PLAY IN CONTEXT

The Victorian Period in England was an era of “improvements.” Victorians seemed to have a positive mania for it. The Victorians improved public housing and public parks. They redesigned London’s sewers for better sanitation. They built many of the public buildings that characterize London today (the British Museum, Albert Hall, The Parliamentary Buildings at Westminster, Big Ben) even Buckingham House got a complete over-hall to become Buckingham Palace.

The reforms also embraced government and policy makers as Britain scrambled to keep up with the changing world of the Industrial Revolution. Laws were passed that improved working conditions in the factories, that required education for all classes, and that redesigned England’s voting laws to give better representation.

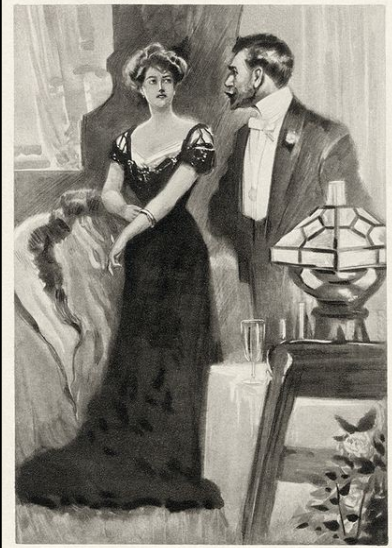


Illustration of Lord Goring & Mrs. Cheveley

The advances in science, medicine, and technology during the 19th century were vast. There seemed to be nothing that human thought and human will could not improve. And it is perhaps inevitable that along with the making of ideal societies and systems, the Victorians should also attempt to make “ideal” men and women.

“I always pass along good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.” ~Lord Goring

An Ideal Husband opened on London stages in 1895. It was the twilight of the Victorian Era. Oscar Wilde and the elite society to which he belonged were more inclined to mock the earnestness of their parent’s generation, but they were products of it none-the-less.

The question of what “ideal standard” men and women should be held to was a topic of discussion in Wilde’s time driven in a large part by the growing women’s right movement in England. It had long been acknowledged that there was a double standard between the “morality” demanded of British women and that required of British men. How should this inequality be addressed? By relaxing the standards for women? Or by increasing the standards for men?

As a general rule, the late Victorians favored the increasing of standards for men. In the years preceding, *An Ideal Husband* there had been a number of plays on London stages addressing this topic. Almost always the plot began with a politician who seemed to be righteous but whose past held a guilty secret. Almost always the plot ended with the politician killing himself in an agony of remorse or being reformed by his angel of a wife and resigning from office.

In *An Ideal Husband*, none of these things happens. In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde shows his society the folly of expecting men or women to measure up to an ideal standard. Because no matter how much you improve on the outside, the fact remains that no man or woman is ideal.

VICTORIANS AND REFORMS

In Oscar Wilde's script, Lady Chiltern is a member of the Women's Liberal Associations. In the late 19th century the Women's Liberal Association was a women's group that advocated social reform. Lady Chiltern talks about several of the reforms that the government signed into laws during the Victorian Period.

FACTORY ACTS

The Industrial Revolution created an unprecedented demand for labor. Often factories employed women and children to work long hours in dangerous conditions for very little pay. The Factory Acts were passed to limit the number of hours and the kinds of work that could be assigned to women and children. For example, in 1833, the textile mills could no longer hire children under nine. In 1847, women and children could not work for more than 10 hours a day in a factory.

THE EIGHT HOURS BILL

Like the Factory Acts passed earlier in the century, the Eight Hours Bill was an attempt to improve the working conditions of the labor force. This bill was put before the house in 1893 and proposed to regulate all businesses, trades and occupations in England so that all workers had a eight hour work day.

"We [women] have much more important work to do than look at each other's bonnets, Lord Goring."
~Lady Chiltern

FEMALE INSPECTORS

Factory inspectors were appointed by the British government to make sure that factory owners complied with the new regulations. At first these inspectors were all men, but in the late 1890's the government began to appoint female inspectors. The logic was that female factory employees would be more likely to confide in a female inspector and to tell her the truth if they were being mistreated.

PARLIMENTARY FRANCHISE

Prior to the reforms acts in the Victorian Era there was no standard national system for registering voters in Great Britain. The Representation of the People Act in 1884 created standardized rules and dramatically increased the number of British men who were able to vote. In England alone the number of eligible voters jumped from 2,338,809 (in 1880) to 4,094,674 (in 1885). Women did not received the right to vote, however, until 1918.

HIGHER EDUCATION OF WOMEN

The Education Acts of 1870 and 1878 required compulsory education for all girls. Working class girls were more likely to be trained with only domestic skills, but middle class girls had a chance at receiving a better education. By the 1890's more English universities were offering degrees for women, but a women's class still determined whether she would have the opportunity for higher education.

What If?

An eight hour work day. Making education available to all children. Higher education for women. These are all things that we take for granted now, due largely to the reform laws that were enacted during the Victorian Era. Try to imagine yourself as a boy or girl in the 1800's. How would your life be different if you were working class? Middle class? What if you were wealthy like Lady Chiltern?

GIRLS IN HIGH SOCIETY

PUTTING UP THE HAIR

A girl signaled that she was ready for marriage and the social round by projecting her 'body image'. She achieved this by using a series of signs and symbols, the first of which was putting up her hair and wearing floor length skirts. This indicated that she was a woman now, and should no longer be treated as a girl.

'The girl in Edwardian England put up her hair to signify that she had reached maturity...

'Girls often looked forward to the privilege of lengthening their skirts and doing up their hair with much the same ardour as older women now seek to preserve the external signs of adolescence.'



"Once a week
is quite often
enough to
propose to
anyone"

~Mabel Chiltern

UNMARRIED GIRLS

In the late 19th century, single women from upper class families had very rigid rules of "good conduct" which they had to follow. "If they offended against the rules, they could find their names struck off the guest lists and their chances of a good marriage ruined. The chief business of the upper class girl was to dine and dance until she married, eventually to become a society hostess. Even when safely engaged, she would not be allowed to drive alone in a carriage with her fiancé, and she was expected to remain innocent and virginal."

THE LONDON SUMMER SEASON

Young girls came out during the London Summer Season which lasted from May to August. As early as February some would have received invitations for their presentation to the King and Queen at the first Court. In any one season approximately one hundred girls would be received at Court, with thirty or forty debutantes being presented at any one time. The London season was a series of events, balls, parties etc that members of the upper classes attended in London. It was a chance for single girls to meet prospective husbands.

BEING PRESENTED AT COURT - DEBUTANTES COMING OUT

'Coming Out' and 'being presented' were landmarks in a young girl's life, - an official recognition of adulthood by parents and society in general. Despite having just left the schoolroom, debutantes were expected to look and behave with the dignity of the hostesses they would soon become. They were eligible for marriage now and would soon begin their lives and wives, mothers and society hostesses.



Web Reference:

[http://www.fashion-era.com/
the_mood_of_edwardian_soci
ety.htm#The Mood Of Ed-
wardian High Society](http://www.fashion-era.com/the_mood_of_edwardian_society.htm#The_Mood_Of_Edwardian_High_Society)

VICTORIAN MANNERS

Victorians had very particular rules about polite behavior. For Example:

- The hours for walking and sitting in the Park are from 4 to 7 p.m. during the summer months.
- A young lady can walk by herself in the Park for the purpose of joining her friends and acquaintances, but she should not sit alone.
- When riding in a carriage, a husband should sit with his back to the horses if another lady is riding with his wife.
- A gentlemen should be the first to get out of the carriage with a view to assisting the ladies to do so.
- It would be unconventional were a lady to drive alone with a gentlemen unless he were nearly related to her or unless she were engaged to be married to him.
- When greeting friends and acquaintances ladies and gentlemen should bow and/or shake hands.
- A lady should not bow to a person only known to her by sight, although she may frequently have seen them in the company of her friends.
- The bow should be a graceful bend, or inclination of the head; not a hasty movement, nor a stiff jerk.
- When bowing a gentlemen should raise his hat, indeed take it off his head, but not with a sudden flourish, or seize it with a sudden dash.
- *The proper way to shake hands:* Take the hand that you are offered firmly; be careful to grasp the hand, not the fingers merely, give it a gentle pressure, and then relinquish it; do not lift it up to shake, neither let it drop suddenly.
- A lady's step should be firm and her gait steady, let her not walk in too great a hurry, nor yet drag slowly along. Let her arms move with the natural motion of the body; they must neither swing to and fro nor dangle by the side.
- A man should take a longer step than a woman, but steadiness and firmness of tread are as necessary for men as for women.
- In the house a gentlemen may change his sitting position in an infinity of ways, lounge and loll, cross his legs, do anything but sit on the edge of his chair or clasp his hands around his knee. A woman, however, must sit still and upright and must not cross her legs.
- A woman's hands should also be still. The hands, if not occupied are so apt to fidget either with each other or with some part of the face or dress. Very often it is a nervous habit; but it should be at once and finally repressed.

"What dreadful manners you have! I am sure you were very badly brought up." ~Mabel Chiltern

What About Us?

Today we don't bow when we meet people or have such strict rules about how one should sit or walk, but every society has rules about polite behavior. What things are considered polite or rude at your house? At your school? Among your friends?

References:

Manners and Rules of Good Society or Solecisms to be Avoided, by A Member of the Aristocracy, published 1916
Etiquette of Good Society, by Lady Colin Campbell, published 1893

COMPARE TO CURRENT TOPICS

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN SOCIAL REFORM

The politics of Oscar Wilde's time were particularly concerned with social reform and with the government's involvement in creating reform laws and regulations that would "improve" society. The particular issues discussed in *An Ideal Husband* like higher education for women seem quite old fashioned, but our modern political parties are equally concerned with passing laws that will "improve" people's lives.

You Compare

Below are links to the education page for the current Democratic Party and the education platform proposed by the Republican Party in the 2008 election. Find one change in education policies and/or funding that these parties would like make possible?

- <http://www.democrats.org/issues/education>
- <http://www.gop.com/2008Platform/Education.htm>

POLITICAL SCANDAL

In the script of *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern states that there is a line between public and private life, "They have different laws, and move on different lines." Lady Chiltern responds, "They should both represent man at his highest." The question of whether a politician should be judged by choices he makes/has made in his past or private life is one that we still debate today.

You Compare

In 2009 the MPR radio station asked listeners to answer the question, "Why should the public care about a politician's private life." In 2001 the BBC asked their viewers a similar question. Look at the comments posted on the links below. Make a list of the different reasons people give. What is your opinion? Should Sir Robert have retired from politics because of his past crime?

- <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/collections/special/columns/todays-question/archive/2009/07/why-should-the-public-care-about-a-politicians-private-life.shtml>
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/1654331.stm

HEROES AND IDEALS

Lady Chiltern has made her husband her hero; she not only loves him as a man; she says that she also "worships" him as an ideal. Lord Goring warns her that this is dangerous because "Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing."

You Compare

- What are some of the heroes of our modern American culture: athletes, movie stars, perhaps other celebrities?
- Can you remember any "scandals" when some of these heroes are discovered doing something wrong?
- Why do you think people are so disappointed when they find out their heroes are not perfect?