

An Ideal Husband



by Oscar Wilde

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An Ideal Husband: Introduction

An Ideal Husband premiered in London, England, on January 3, 1895, and was published in 1896. It was the third of Wilde's four comedic plays to be staged, and it was as big a success with audiences as the previous two. However, critics of the time were not as appreciative as audiences, which was the case for all of Wilde's social comedies. Critics thought these plays more flippant than substantive; audiences were delighted by the wonderful wit of the dramas. Numerous choice "one-liners" and other pithy witticisms that Wilde's dramatic characters deliver are still quoted by people today.

An Ideal Husband is often called a "social comedy" because it has both a serious ("social") as well as a comedic plot line. On the one hand, the play is about a prominent politician who is in danger of losing his reputation as a paragon of integrity, owing to a youthful indiscretion that the play's villain is threatening to

expose. Although the politician's transgression is not exposed, this plot line conveys the idea that there are very few people in the world who are wholly good and to pretend so is hypocritical. This is a message for Wilde's contemporaries, a late-Victorian group obsessed with purity and goodness but, of course, as imperfect as the people of any other age. On the other hand, the play is supposed to be funny, as it is, thanks to the witty bantering of the characters, especially in moments when the play is not directly concerned with the "social" plot.

Wilde and his play are by now firmly established in the English-language canon of literature, and most libraries hold volumes of the individual or collected plays. The Modern Library editions of Wilde's collected comedies are the most widespread.

An Ideal Husband: Oscar Wilde Biography

The writer and wit known as Oscar Wilde was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854. This lavish and romantic set of given names evokes Irish myth and heroes, conveying Wilde's parents' pride in their Irish nationality.

Wilde came from a prominent family. His father, a surgeon who operated on the monarchs of Europe, was knighted. His mother, a historian and political commentator and activist, was very prominent in the Irish freedom movements that would bring Ireland its independence from England in 1921. Both of Wilde's parents published numerous books in their lifetimes.

As a boy in school, Wilde excelled in his favorite subjects. He then spent three years at Trinity College, one of the foremost universities in Ireland. He excelled at Trinity and then made his way to Oxford University in Cambridge, England. At Oxford he distinguished himself yet again, winning prestigious prizes.

Once he had graduated and established himself in London, Wilde began publishing in various genres: poetry, drama, essays, fairy tales, and more. He was also an editor of magazines. Equally important was the fame he gained in London as a wit and a dandy (someone devoted to fashion and style). In the midst of late-Victorian England's drably coated men, Wilde went about in knee breeches, fine vests, and long hair (at least for a time). He would speak at public events and art exhibits, and people would listen, vastly amused and intrigued. The magazines that chronicled the goings on about town in London began to satirize and parody Wilde. In 1894, Wilde married; he and his wife had two sons.

Wilde reached his pinnacle of fame in 1895, when *An Ideal Husband* premiered on the London stage. The Prince of Wales and many other notables were present on opening night and found the play very much to their liking. *An Ideal Husband* was the third of four highly successful plays Wilde wrote before his career was destroyed by an unfortunate and tragic turn of events.

Very shortly after the premieres of *An Ideal Husband* and Wilde's fourth comedic play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was found guilty of indecency and sentenced to two years in prison at hard labor. Wilde's trial followed his having charged a British aristocrat with libel for accusing him of homosexual acts—a mistake because Wilde was indeed involved with Sir Alfred Douglas at the time, and late-Victorian society was singularly intolerant of such free behavior.

After prison, his career and health ruined, Wilde lived his last days in France. He died on November 30, 1900, in Paris. In 1909, his remains were moved to the French National Cemetery of Père Lachaise. His last major works are *De Profundis* and *Ballad of Reading Goal*, both of which pertain to his terrible trial and imprisonment.

An Ideal Husband: Summary

Act 1

The action of *An Ideal Husband* takes place within about twenty four hours. Act 1 takes place at Sir Robert Chiltern's house, which is located in the fashionable part of London. The Chilterns are hosting a reception. The first two speakers of the play, two minor characters, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont, set a witty tone. They are pretty, young married women, and they speak to each other languidly and cleverly. Attention then moves to various new arrivals at the reception, such as the Earl of Caversham, who inquires after his son Lord Goring, and Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's sister, who chats with the Earl of Caversham. The most important arrivals, however, are Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley, because the latter is the play's villain.

That something serious will be occurring in this otherwise comic play becomes clear when Lady Markby introduces Mrs. Cheveley to Lady Chiltern. Lady Chiltern realizes that she knows Mrs. Cheveley, but under a different name—the name of her first husband. Mrs. Cheveley clearly disturbs Lady Chiltern, and Lady Chiltern appears to dislike the other woman intensely.

Mrs. Cheveley has come to the party to speak to Sir Robert specifically, and, soon enough, the two find themselves alone. What she wishes to talk about is blackmail: if Sir Robert does not support what is in fact a doomed South American canal scheme in a speech to the parliament the next day, she will reveal the terrible secret of his youth, which will destroy his life and career. Shaken to his core, Sir Robert agrees to do her bidding.

At the end of act 1, Lady Chiltern succeeds in getting her husband to admit that Mrs. Cheveley has persuaded him to change his mind about the canal project. She is outraged and convinces her husband to write to Mrs. Cheveley immediately, telling her that he will not support the project in his parliamentary speech. Wondering what kind of power Mrs. Cheveley has over her husband, Lady Chiltern declares that it had better not be blackmail—that he better not be one of those men who pretend to be pillars of the community but who in fact have shameful secrets.

Act 2

Act 2 opens the next morning, once again at the Chiltern residence. Lord Goring and Robert Chiltern are speaking; Chiltern is telling his good friend Goring everything. At one point, Chiltern bitterly wonders why a youthful folly has the power to ruin a man's career, even when that man has spent so many years doing good works. To this Goring replies that what Chiltern did was not folly but fairly ugly and very grave: he sold a state secret for money.

Chiltern tries to explain, saying that when he was young he was poor, so that it did not matter that he came from a good family because his prospects were limited by a lack of funds. He tells how he was seduced by the teachings of Baron Arnheim, who turned his head with "the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power." The baron "preached to [him] the most marvelous of all gospel, the gospel of gold," he says. Chiltern says he was ferociously ambitious, and that when the chance came to make his fortune, it did not matter that it depended on a crime; he took it.

Lady Chiltern comes home while the men are conversing. She has been at a "Woman's Liberal Association" meeting, where, as she says, they discuss things such as "Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise," and so on. Soon, Robert Chiltern leaves and Mabel Chiltern takes his place, asking Goring if he will meet her the next morning. Goring agrees and then leaves. Next, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley are announced. Mrs. Cheveley is inquiring about a diamond brooch she lost the day before, asking whether it was found by anyone at the reception. (Lord Goring found the brooch and still has it.)

When Lady Markby leaves, Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley are able to speak to each other frankly. Lady Chiltern makes it clear that Mrs. Cheveley is not welcome in her house. This spurs Mrs. Cheveley to tell Lady Chiltern the truth about her husband, and she warns Lady Chiltern that she will carry out her threat. Lady Chiltern is devastated to find out that her husband is like so many other men, men who have shameful secrets. She confronts her husband and tells him that her love for him is dead.

Act 3

Act 3 takes place in Lord Goring's house, in the library, which is connected to a number of other rooms. Lord Goring is preparing to go out for the evening when he receives a letter from Lady Chiltern. It reads, "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." Goring rightly deduces that Lady Chiltern now knows the truth about her husband and that she needs to talk to someone.

Goring cancels his plans to go out and realizes that he must tell his servants that he is not in for anyone except Lady Chiltern; it would be disastrous for her reputation if she were found in his home without a chaperon. However, before he can do this, his father is announced. Unfortunately for Goring, his father is in the mood to lecture him. Goring tries unsuccessfully to get rid of his father and must listen to him go on about Goring's need to marry and settle down. In the meantime, Mrs. Cheveley has arrived, and a servant, thinking she is Lady Chiltern, escorts her into Goring's drawing room.

Finally able to show his father the door, Goring is put out to find Sir Robert Chiltern on his doorstep. Goring tries to get rid of Chiltern, believing all the while that Lady Chiltern is in the next room. He is concerned that Chiltern will discover his wife and misconstrue her presence in his home. Chiltern lingers and eventually overhears a sound coming from the room in which Mrs. Cheveley is waiting. He goes in, sees the woman, and returns to Goring disgusted. He believes that Mrs. Cheveley and Goring are having an affair. Goring, for his part, believes that Chiltern has just seen his own wife. Chiltern leaves and Goring sees that it is Mrs. Cheveley who is in the room.

Lord Goring has Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch and tells her that the brooch was a gift he gave to his niece, so that the only way Mrs. Cheveley could have come by it was to have stolen it, which she did. He threatens to call the police and have her prosecuted for theft unless she drops her blackmail plans. She has no choice but to concede, and Goring makes her hand over the letter Chiltern wrote all those years ago. Goring burns the letter.

Act 4

Act 4 is the resolution of the play. It takes place in the morning room of the Chiltern residence, the same setting as act 2. Lord Goring finally realizes that Mabel Chiltern is the woman for him and proposes. Mabel is very happy, as is the visiting Earl of Caversham. Lady Chiltern has forgiven her husband but still believes he must give up public life. She thinks they should retire to the country. Lord Goring convinces her otherwise. He makes her see that her husband thrives on politics, and if she were to take that away from him, he would become bitter and disillusioned and their marriage would suffer. Lady Chiltern realizes that Goring is right and relents. Sir Robert is ecstatic.

An Ideal Husband: Characters

Lady Olivia Basildon

Lady Basildon and her close friend Mrs. Marchmont are the first speakers in Wilde's play, setting the tone with their witty banter. "They are types," Wilde's stage notes say, "of exquisite fragility," and they are female dandies. Lady Basildon and her friend affect a world-weary attitude, pretending to find the fashionable London parties they go to terribly boring. As Lady Basildon says of a different party the two are planning to attend: "Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere." The duo's

worldly sophistication and wit undoubtedly flattered a portion of his audience whom Wilde hoped would enjoy his play, namely fashionable society women.

Lord Caversham

See Earl of Caversham

Mrs. Cheveley

Mrs. Cheveley, the villain of Wilde's play, enters the society of the Chilterns and Lord Goring determined either to get her own way or to destroy those who will not help her achieve her ends. She comes to London from Vienna, where she has been living for some time, to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern. She knows Chiltern's terrible, scandalous secret and has concrete evidence of his transgression (a letter he wrote). She informs Chiltern that she will expose his sinful past unless he praises a South American canal scheme instead of condemning it for the stock market swindle it is as he plans to do in a parliamentary speech. Mrs. Cheveley and her friends have invested heavily in the scheme, and if the respected Chiltern were to advise his government to support it, Mrs. Cheveley and her friends would become much richer than they already are.

Since one of Wilde's points in the play is that large fortunes often have their roots in immorality, he needed to make Mrs. Cheveley's actions thoroughly unsympathetic to draw a convincing villain. The stock market manipulation had to be something that would not only increase her wealth but also eventually entail the impoverishment of others. Further, she is a blackmailer and habitual thief and liar. Still, this said, Mrs. Cheveley delivers some of the play's choicest witticisms.

Lady Gertrude Chiltern

Gertrude Chiltern is a sheltered, good woman who worships perfect goodness most especially in the form of her "ideal husband." The problem with her worship of perfection and of her husband is that her husband is not in fact perfect; indeed, he has an extremely disreputable secret in his past—a secret that could ruin his career.

Described as being possessed of "a grave Greek beauty," Lady Chiltern is appropriately noble in character. She is involved in all sorts of good works. For example, she is a feminist campaigning for the right of girls and women to have a higher education. She is, in short, a moneyed woman with principles: she believes that she must give something back to society by supporting charities, foundations, and other causes.

Lady Chiltern also believes that when women love men they worship them; by doing so, such women require that their men conform to their ideals of what is great. And until Lady Chiltern learns the truth about her husband's past, she is certain that he is indeed her ideal. She believes that he is a thoroughly good man committed to doing only good in the world.

Lady Chiltern must learn a stern lesson in the play: that nobody is perfect and that to wish this is naive and dangerous. Lady Chiltern, then, is not really perfectly good until she accepts the fact of, and is willing to forgive, imperfection.

Miss Mabel Chiltern

Mabel Chiltern has her eye on Lord Goring as a husband, and the two become engaged in the play's last act. She is the sister of Robert Chiltern. She is pretty, intelligent, and pert, and she is as witty as Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are. Knowing that Lord Goring is the man for her, Mabel Chiltern is waiting gracefully and humorously, albeit somewhat impatiently, for him to realize that she is the perfect woman for him.

From Lord Goring's father's point of view, she is a clever and pleasing young woman who is far too good for the likes of his son. Mabel is a foil to Gertrude because she is a young woman who does not expect perfection from any human being. She declares that one of the reasons she likes Lord Goring is because he has

faults.

Sir Robert Chiltern

A respected parliamentarian, Robert Chiltern is confronted by his disreputable past, blackmailed, and finally saved from any public scandal. The ugly secret of his past is that his fortune rests on his having sold a state secret. As a young man, he finds out that England intends to support an extensive overseas construction project, which means that anybody who invests in the project before the announcement is made public will become rich. In other words, whoever buys stock in the companies concerned before the prices of the stocks go up, on the strength of England's interest and support of the project, will reap a fortune.

Chiltern writes a letter to alert an acquaintance who buys a great deal of stock and pays Chiltern handsomely from the vast profits. Yet, what was required of the young Chiltern and all those in the know, as he knew very well, was strict secrecy and the ethical understanding that any "insider" stock purchases were criminal actions punishable by prison time.

Chiltern is horrified to learn that Mrs. Cheveley has the letter he wrote so long ago and plans to publish it unless he concedes to her demands. Ironically, what Mrs. Cheveley wants him to do is back an overseas construction project, so that, like Chiltern before her, she and her friends can make a financial killing on the strength of their early investments. The crucial difference, however, is that the scheme in which Mrs. Cheveley has invested is a scam, but Lord Chiltern's project was not.

Despite having planned to condemn the canal scheme because he knows that it is a scam, Chiltern capitulates to Mrs. Cheveley's demands. He cannot face scandal and ruin.

Chiltern changes his mind about his speech when his wife intervenes. Lady Chiltern knows the details of her husband's political activities and convinces him to deliver the speech he knows that he should. So, he writes a letter to Cheveley communicating his change of heart.

For a time, Chiltern is able to prevent his wife from finding out why Mrs. Cheveley has so much power over him, but eventually she discovers the truth. When she does, she declares that their love is dead. Chiltern is devastated, seeing his career and entire life crumbling around him. But, luckily for Chiltern, Lord Goring, his faithful friend, is able to foil Mrs. Cheveley's plans and convinces Lady Chiltern that her husband still deserves her love.

Earl of Caversham

The Earl of Caversham (Lord Caversham) is Lord Goring's father, a stock characterization of a father who is perplexed by the vagaries of a son he simply cannot understand. He spends his time chastising his son and lecturing him about what he should do with his time. Short of doing something worthwhile with his life, Lord Caversham advises Lord Goring to marry at the very least. Clearly, despite his exasperation, Lord Caversham is fond of his lazy son.

Viscount Lord Arthur Goring

Lord Goring, a close friend of Sir Robert Chiltern, saves the day for his friend by foiling Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail attempt. He is able to prevent her from carrying out her threat because he acquires proof that she is a thief and tells her he will inform the police unless she drops her plan, which she does. Yet, Goring's involvement in the serious plot line of this play is far less entertaining than his involvement in the comedic goings-on of *An Ideal Husband*.

Lord Goring speaks the play's funniest lines, many of which are still quoted today. For example, he informs his butler Phipps that, "To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance, Phipps." He also has a funny rejoinder for his father when Caversham says he cannot fathom how Goring can stand London society.

According to Goring's father, London society has devolved into a "lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing." Goring replies: "I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about."

Lord Goring is a dandy: he is not simply in fashion but *trendsetting* in dress; he pretends not to take anything seriously; he values witty repartee and excels at it.

If it were not for his father urging him to realize that it is time for him to marry, Lord Goring would undoubtedly continue in his life of perfect leisure and self-absorption. However, alerted to his duty to produce heirs, Goring opens his eyes and sees that the best companion for him as wife is close at hand in the person of Mabel Chiltern.

Mrs. Margaret Marchmont

Mrs. Marchmont is the friend of Lady Basilton. The two women are very close to each other and much the same in character.

Lady Markby

Lady Markby is Mrs. Cheveley's immediate connection to London society, as Mrs. Cheveley is younger and has traveled to London from Vienna alone. Lady Markby introduces Mrs. Cheveley to persons whom she does not yet know and chaperones the younger woman around town. She is an established, well-liked, older member of the moneyed, aristocratic society depicted in Wilde's play.

Phipps

Phipps is Lord Goring's "ideal" butler. Phipps is self-effacing and discreet. His job is not to assert himself or his own personality in any way. Yet, in conversation with Lord Goring, he is not above subtle humor—delivered quite impassively, however.

Vicomte de Nanjac

The vicomte is a French attaché who adores all things English and at whom Lord Goring pokes fun. His purpose in the play appears to be to have given the English audiences of the time something French to snicker at. This is a very popular gesture on Wilde's part, since the French and the English were involved in bitter political and cultural rivalries for a long time.

An Ideal Husband: Themes

Scandal, Hypocrisy, and the Ideal

Cautioning Sir Robert that she will indeed carry out her threat and ruin his career, Mrs. Cheveley declares:

Remember to what point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbors. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man—now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it.

Here, in a nutshell, is the central message of Wilde's play: the more a culture upholds stringent moral values, the more likely it is that publicly prominent people will crumble under charges of impropriety. By this Wilde does not mean that immorality or criminal behavior is acceptable. What he means is that an exaggerated attachment to moral purity leads to social ills and not social good. This might seem counterintuitive; after all,

should not the respect for moral purity lead to more people being truly good? For Wilde, it just leads to more people being failures in their own eyes and others' because it is impossible for most people not to make a mistake at some point in their lives. It encourages people not to hide even their minor vices, but to proclaim loudly against any and all weakness, thereby becoming hypocrites and paving the way for their greater shame if they are ever found out for their true selves. As Mrs. Cheveley's speech makes clear, in the Victorian climate of intolerance, politicians and other social leaders were pressured to proclaim themselves paragons of purity when they were not. Consequently, when the truth of their large or small sins came to the surface, their careers and reputations were compromised or ruined.

Mrs. Cheveley's speech was not only meant for Wilde's British audiences but also for his avid American audiences. This is not simply because America was culturally close to England but also because of pertinent American history and its continuing influence on American life. Some of the first Europeans to settle in the United States were members of Puritan sects, and what these Christian fundamentalists are most remembered for is their period of hysteria and cruelty. In their pursuit of moral purity they saw evil everywhere, declared numerous persons witches, and burned them alive (the "witch trials"). Extremism, in other words, leads only and always to tragedy, even if it is extremism in the name of good.

As far as Mrs. Cheveley is concerned, politicians who conform and project themselves as paragons of good are hypocrites. They, like Chiltern, have things they need to hide, whether in their past or in their present. Wilde's disdain for hypocrisy explains his attachment to characters who are dandies like Lord Goring. Lord Goring's dandy pose entails, essentially, the notion that he is wicked and cares about himself first of all. In other words, the values he professes are precisely the opposite of those who proclaim themselves upstanding citizens wedded to duty and the welfare of others. Yet, if the upstanding citizen cannot possibly be the paragon he or she professes to be, then he or she is akin to Goring—a person who will, at times, let his or her own interests take precedence over the public good. In short, says Wilde, it is better to be a Goring, who does not pretend to be good, than to be a hypocrite.

An Ideal Husband's play on things "ideal" or pure is related to its cautionary message about the Victorian obsession with perfect goodness. Obviously, the perfect specimen of any given thing is an ideal specimen of the thing. Lady Chiltern wants an ideal husband, which is a man who fulfills his husbandly role perfectly and who is, as well, an ideal human, i.e., perfectly good. She thinks this is what she has in Sir Robert, and Sir Robert, for his part, loves his wife so much that this is what he wants her to think. In learning that she is wrong to want such a thing, Lady Chiltern's development over the course of the play is a crucial component of the play's message.

The coupling of Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring is Wilde's antidote to the Chilterns. Mabel, notably, declares that she wants to be a "good" wife to Lord Goring, not a perfect or ideal one. Lord Goring, perhaps, is Wilde's version of a goodenough husband, as he readily admits that he has faults. The human race, Wilde seems to say, will always fall short of its ideals, but this should not be occasion for tragedy. On the contrary, what leads to tragedy is insisting that perfection must be achieved even after the best that can be done has been tried.

Ambition

Politicians in late-nineteenth-century England were not terribly different from politicians today. They saw themselves as public servants and entered into politics to do some good and make a difference. Yet, to go far in politics it takes ambition. Politicians who aim to reach high positions in the government have to have nerves of steel and very thick skins. They are ruthlessly attacked by members of the opposing party; even others in their own party will attempt to outmaneuver them; journalists will dig into their private lives and print anything that will sell a magazine or newspaper; and so forth. Thus, in addition to wanting to do good, a politician aiming for the top has to be very ambitious. He or she has to have some craving for glory that makes all the pain of getting to the top bearable. In the ferociously ambitious Sir Robert Chiltern, Wilde presents just

this type of politician. In doing so, he has presented his highly successful politician accurately. After all, Chiltern is only forty but he is already an under-secretary, and, at the end of the play, the prime minister offers him a cabinet position.

This depiction of the politician's hungry ambition makes sense in *An Ideal Husband*. The play is concerned with having people adopt a realistic view of the world and how it works; consequently, Wilde avoids an idealized picture of the motivations of top-ranking politicians.

An Ideal Husband: Style

Wit

Wit as a type of humor is what Wilde is known for, both in his everyday life and in a number of his writings, including *An Ideal Husband*. Wit is clever humor—not bawdy, rude, silly, or visual funniness. Wit entails the delivery of an unexpected or surprising insight, or a clever reversal of expectations. For example, at one point in the play, Mrs. Cheveley says, “a woman’s first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn’t it? What the second duty is, no one has yet discovered.” This would have provoked laughter because the popular saying she is reversing is as follows: “A woman’s first duty is to her husband.” Victorians were known for their commitment to duty and there would have been not one person in Wilde’s audience who had not heard and read the popular axiom many, many times.

Epigram and Aphorism

Epigrammatic turns of speech are short and sweet, and they are somehow surprising or witty. Wilde’s characters’ wit is often epigrammatic. For example, as Mrs. Cheveley says at one point, “Oh! I don’t care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them.” Mrs. Cheveley’s purported reason for disliking the London social season is funny. Even funnier is that what makes the season “matrimonial” is not simply the search for husbands.

An aphorism is a brief statement containing an opinion or general truth, which might or might not be witty. Wilde excelled in wit in the form of aphorisms. Lady Cheveley, for example, delivers quite a few aphoristic witticisms in *An Ideal Husband*. For example, “Morality,” she says, “is simply the attitude we take toward people whom we personally dislike.” Or, as she says elsewhere: “Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.” There is also Lord Goring’s opinion about good advice. In reply to Mabel Chiltern when she questions his having told her it’s past her bedtime, Lord Goring says, “My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don’t see why I shouldn’t give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never any use to oneself.”

Comedy of Manners

While Wilde has a serious plot and message in *An Ideal Husband*, the play is mostly comic. As such, it is close to a form of dramatic comedy known as the comedy of manners. Comedies of manners are mostly associated with eighteenth-century Europe, although they date back to the beginnings of European drama. A comedy of manners is a play whose purpose is to satirize human vagaries. They focus on a particular stratum of society and make fun of that group’s pettiness, hypocrisies, vanities, failings, and so forth. In *An Ideal Husband*, for example, Wilde satirizes the hypocrisy of the English ruling classes through his portrait of Sir Robert Chiltern. Comedies of manners are also characterized by their wit, i.e., the way that the characters’ dialogue is composed mostly of clever and funny bantering. This explains Wilde’s attraction to the form.

Melodrama

Melodramas tell their stories through sensational and improbable characters and turns of event. For example, villains are thoroughly villainous in melodrama, and heroes and heroines are purity itself. Rings, letters, gloves and such items are lost and found in ways that lead to all sorts of revelations and complications of plot.

Heroines often end up in terrible danger, but the hero always arrives at the last moment to save the day, and so forth. Wilde employs some stock melodramatic situations and events in *An Ideal Husband*. For example, the detail of the incriminating letter from the past and the blackmail scheme on which the plot turns are melodramatic flourishes.

Problem Play

What are called problem plays were first written in Europe in the late nineteenth century. They are called this because they tackle some pressing social development of the day. For example, the playwright credited with introducing the form in its purest, earliest form is Henrik Ibsen, whose *A Doll's House* took on the issue of feminism: the struggles of Europe's "new" women and their families. If critics have difficulty calling *An Ideal Husband* a comedy of manners, and some prefer the term "social comedy," this is because the play has a serious element to it. This serious component reflects Wilde's respect for the problem play.

An Ideal Husband: Historical Context

The Dandy

Dandies, of which there are many in Wilde's play, are a phenomenon of nineteenth- and earlytwentieth-century Europe. Dandies were men that were known for their commitment to fashion— usually extravagant fashion—and for their love of all things beautiful in general. Nineteenth-century dandies in the new mega-cities such as, Paris, London, and New York, would stroll elegantly down pedestrian boulevards and frequent fashionable places. It is said that their exquisite nature and distaste for all things rough and vulgar stemmed from their dismay over a changing world. Specifically, these city dandies were witnessing the industrialization of their environment. This involved a change from a world where rural living was dominant to a world where factories in new urban centers were being rapidly built—with all their belching, polluting coal smoke, as well as their horribly exploited and impoverished workers (ten–twelve hour or more workdays, pitifully inadequate pay, and six, sometimes seven-day work weeks). What they saw was ugliness and the worship of money no matter the environmental and human cost, so they rejected the practical and spoke for the value of the ephemeral, the delicate, and the beautiful. It was a way of insisting that the creation of wealth was evil if the quality of peoples' lives was the price.

Wilde himself was a dandy in dress for some time. After graduating from Oxford, he spent a few years dressing in what was then considered exquisite fashion when he went out in the evenings. He did not go so far as to dress unusually in the daytime, however.

Many photographs of Wilde in one of his "exquisite" outfits exist; and what was so outrageous then were knee breeches and a velvet waistcoat, a flowing cloak, and longish hair.

Wilde did not dress unusually for his evenings out for long; as soon as he became well known he conformed, albeit always fashionably, to the more conservative tastes of the time.

Aestheticism

Aestheticism as a movement in the arts developed in England in the late nineteenth century, but somewhat earlier in other countries, such as France, where it had its roots. The aestheticist dictum is "art for art's sake," meaning that an artwork need only be beautiful (well made) to be worthy of admiration. In other words, a work of art did not need to have any obvious social value to be great. So, for example, if an artist wished to depict the life of a criminal, as long as he or she did it well and accurately, the work of art was valuable. Also, if an artist simply wished to make a work of art, treating a subject that would not necessarily ennoble its audience, then that was fine, as long as the work was well-done. If this sounds like a reasonable formula for art, it is. Yet, aesthetes, or followers of aestheticism, caused a stir in England at the time because during the Victorian era the English developed a taste for art with a strong social quotient. They liked their art

to be obviously ennobling. They wanted art to be morally instructive, for example, in which the good was clearly distinguished from the bad, the bad was always punished, and the good was always rewarded.

A further problem with aestheticism from the point of view of traditional, more conservative Victorians was that aesthetes took their principles very seriously, some to an extreme, and flaunted them. For example, the scholar most responsible for propagating aestheticist views in England, Walter Pater, wrote works proclaiming that the enjoyment, cultivation, and experience of beauty and exquisite sensation was one of the most important human pursuits of all. He wrote these rather extravagant ideas down, most famously, in the conclusion to a book entitled *The Renaissance*. Pater's followers, aesthetes, were, of course, dandies. They dressed beautifully, spoke beautifully, and enjoyed conversations about the best of art and decoration past and present.

Pater, an Oxford don, influenced Wilde while he was a student at Oxford. Not that Wilde's interests and life can be explained solely with reference to dandyism and Aestheticism, but these formations did, nonetheless, make their mark on Wilde.

An Ideal Husband: Critical Overview

Many of the more serious critics of Wilde's day either ignored or were sparing in their praise of *An Ideal Husband*. By the time the play was staged, Wilde had many enemies, both major and minor. This was the result of his years as a dandy and his entire adult life as a cutting wit. On the one hand, he was thought frivolous and immoral; on the other, his wit often had as its target the very critics who were reviewing his work.

The critics of Wilde's time who were not impressed by the play thought it like its author: frivolous and lacking substance. Printed the day after the play opened, the review in London's major newspaper, *The Times*, is a case in point. An excerpt reads as follows:

An Ideal Husband was brought out last night with a similar degree of success to that which has attended Mr. Wilde's previous productions. It is a similar degree of success due to similar causes. For *An Ideal Husband* is marked by the same characteristics as *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*. There is a group of well-dressed women and men on the stage, talking a strained, inverted, but rather amusing idiom, while the action, the dramatic motive, of the play springs from [sic] a conventional device of the commonest order of melodrama. Mr. Wilde's ingenuity is verbal; there is none of this quality expended upon his plot and very little upon his characters, most of whom have caught the author's trick of phrase.

Still, negative reviews were far fewer for *An Ideal Husband* than for the previous two social comedies (named above) because by now critics hesitated to fly in the face of public opinion. No matter what they wrote, Wilde's comic plays had long runs and his supporters and audiences loved them.

Once Wilde was imprisoned, theaters ceased staging his plays for a time. But, within a decade or so, *An Ideal Husband* could be seen again. Reviews of these productions concentrated less on whether the plays deserved to be staged and more on the quality of the given production: Had the play been well directed? Well acted?

What would take more time to develop is academic scholarship on Wilde. With the exception of one or two studies, Wilde and his works did not begin receiving serious scholarly attention until the last decades of the twentieth century. A number of factors contributed to this academic interest: Wilde's wise analysis of late-Victorian culture was in accord with the prevailing view of the era; an interest in how Irish writers

worked with and against the rules and canon of British literature became a subject of interest; and the developing fields of gender, sexuality, and gay and lesbian studies looked with interest on writers such as Wilde.

In general, critics consider Wilde's last comedy his best. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde finally wrote what most critics think he should have written all along, namely a pure comedy of manners. There is no "social" plot to *The Importance of Being Earnest* and no melodrama.

Even as many of Wilde's works are considered very good works of art, he is as important for who he was in both public and private life as for what he wrote. This is appropriate, because to the aesthete, the art of living is what matters most. Mrs. Cheveley puts it this way: "The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times."

An Ideal Husband: Criticism

Critical Essay on *An Ideal Husband*

The country in which Oscar Wilde was born was, for many centuries, a territory of the United Kingdom (Britain). Ireland was, then, a colony of Britain, a situation of enforced dependence that most Irish deeply resented. Uprisings against British rule were common until, finally, Home Rule was established in 1921. After this date, most major Irish- British skirmishes pertained to the contested territory of Northern Ireland, a portion of the Irish island that Britain retained owing to Northern Ireland's large number of ethnic and religious Britons. (Northern Ireland is still British land to this day.)

Of interest to critics lately, in terms of Irish writers such as Wilde, James Joyce, and others, is how these authors' works might evince patterns of anti-imperial expression. In other words, even if the work in question has little obvious, or no evident, political content relating to the Irish-British relations, how might the writing still be somehow colonial? What might the writing of the colonial writers of the world's empires have in common?

As of a few decades ago, anybody who thought of Wilde probably thought of him as an English author. Yet, a more accurate description of him, perhaps, is that he is an Irish writer writing in the language of the empire to which his country belonged. Indeed, if it were not for British imperial ambitions, Wilde might have spoken and written in Gaelic, the predominant Irish language that British rulers suppressed. (School children in Ireland now learn Gaelic, but English is still the dominant language in the country.)

While Wilde had political convictions, he did not write much that was overtly political. Yet, he did grow up in a household taken with the cause of Ireland's quest for independence. His mother was an extremely well known and influential political organizer and writer on the side of Irish independence. She published many books on Irish history and folklore, and, under the pen name of Speranza, she wrote a great deal of political material for the independence movement.

Still, even taking into account his mother's profound patriotism and his own support of Irish independence, Wilde does not present himself as an obvious candidate to be studied as an Irish writer. He chose to live, after all, in London, the center of the empire; then again, this would be the likely destination of many ambitious writers of the time who were writing in English. Another interesting detail complicating Wilde's identity and status is that his family was Protestant. That is, they shared Britain's brand of Christianity, not Ireland's (Catholicism).

Nevertheless, certain critics have embraced Wilde as a colonial, Irish writer, and what might be anti-imperial about *An Ideal Husband* will now be addressed in what follows.

One of the most significant aspects of Wilde's art for colonial critics is the particular nature and focus of Wilde's wit and favorite themes. His wit, critics say, would have encouraged contemporary audiences not simply to think, but to question the notions that enabled them to construct the secure imperial identities they presumably had. How might a populace support the vast imperial cause of Britain—the imperial project that at one point encompassed colonies stretching around the entire globe? For starters, colonial critics say, Britons had to be very sure of their cultural values and identity, and that these particular values and ways were superior to others: one did not colonize simply for financial gain; one colonized to bring to foreign peoples one's superior way of life.

How, then, to encourage British audiences to think flexibly about their identities and to question the spreading of British culture? Well, one thing would be to highlight the problem of identity as such; in this regard, Lord Goring's posing is significant (indeed, the fact that Wilde's most entertaining characters all believe in the pose is significant). To adopt a pose means to *choose* how one wishes to come off. It means that there is no real, true self (identity) that one cannot help but express; it means that one can perform and create the self one pleases, that one can create a self from scratch. This notion of making-the-self invests the individual with great critical and moral power. It substitutes the individual for the social body: each person must decide who he or she wants to be, and each person must create his or her own identity. People who believe that they have the power to choose their beliefs are likely to be people who are critical of public opinion, or at least always willing to question it, and public opinion in Wilde's time, in England, was decidedly on the side of the empire.

In *An Ideal Husband*, there are a number of instances where Wilde's wit takes as its target the notion that there is no true and inevitable self to be expressed. The best and clearest example is near the beginning of the play, in an exchange between Sir Robert Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley. Chiltern has asked Cheveley if she is a pessimist or optimist, to which she replies that they are both just poses. Chiltern then says, "You prefer to be natural?" Cheveley replies, "Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up." Here, Wilde makes it clear that there is no such thing as being natural, as being oneself. In other words, one is always what one chooses to be.

The stage notes of *An Ideal Husband* are another place where Wilde conveys the idea that people are what they make of themselves, and, hence, that people should think carefully about what they want to believe in and who they want to be. This is conveyed in the many times that Wilde compares his characters to works of art, to reverse the maxim that "art imitates life." In other words, when thinking of art, people tend to think that artists take life as their subject: art imitates life. What so many of Wilde's stage notes humorously suggest to the contrary is that "life imitates art." Why? Because for Wilde, it would be much better for someone to read a book or see a painting and get an idea and decide to apply it to his or her own life than for an artist to observe and simply replicate what he or she has observed. In other words, Wilde wants an audience who is always willing to adopt new ideas, discard old ones, and so forth. To put this another way, Wilde insisted that people should approach themselves as "works of art," as wholly "artificial" and made-up things—as nothing but bundles of "artifice." Thus, for example, Wilde's description of the Earl of Caversham: "A fine Whig type. Rather like a portrait by Lawrence." Of Mabel Chiltern he writes, "To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so." Of Mrs. Cheveley, the following: "A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools." The message is clear: art is the original thing, humans are the copy, and people should look for good art to imitate! Of course, with this Wilde knew that he was being both provocative and funny. Then as today, common wisdom has it that "artificial" persons are less admirable than persons who are somehow "just themselves."

Another aspect of *An Ideal Husband* that undoubtedly pertains to Wilde's status as a colonial is the way the play makes fun of the Victorian tendency to devote a great deal of time to doing good works. That is, throughout the play, Wilde's socialites and dandies praise the lazy and deplore the active. As a colonial, Wilde would be interested in questioning the Victorian commitment to ameliorative work because what was motivating the empire was the notion that the world outside of England needed to be saved from itself. In spreading British culture and ways, the English believed that they were doing the world a good turn (they were doing good work). For example, they thought of themselves as persons bringing Christianity to those they thought of as "heathens" (non-Christians), no matter that the "heathens" of the world had their own religions and cultures. So, Wilde asks, is your good work truly good? Do the recipients of your help truly appreciate it? Do perhaps the recipients of your help think of it as an imposition or even an unwelcome evil? Thus, for example, the following types of comments in *An Ideal Husband*: "Sir John's temper since he has taken seriously to politics," says Lady Markby of her husband, "has become quite unbearable. Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm"; Lady Markby again: "I assure you my life will be quite ruined unless they send John at once to the Upper House. He won't take any interest in politics then, will he?"; again, Lady Markby: "Shall I see you at Lady Bonar's to-night? She has discovered a wonderful new genius. He does . . . nothing at all, I believe. That is a great comfort, is it not?" There is also Mabel Chiltern's joke about where the proceeds of a theatrical event are going, another shot at Victorian high-mindedness: "But it is for an excellent charity: in aid of the Undeserving, the only people I am really interested in." She also jokes in reply to the Earl of Caversham's declaration that his son Lord Goring leads an "idle" life: "How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season."

The eminent critic and scholar Terry Eagleton sums up the politics of Wilde's art and life as follows:

If Wilde is not usually thought of in Britain as Irish, neither is he commonly seen as a particularly political figure. Yet Wilde is political in all kinds of ways, some of them fairly obvious and some of them not. He wrote finely about socialism, spoke up for Irish republicanism when the British sneered at it, and despite his carefully nurtured flippancy displayed throughout his life tenderness and compassion toward the dispossessed, who no doubt plucked some faint chord in himself. But he is also political in some more elusive senses of the term—political, for example, because he is very funny, a remorseless debunker of the hightoned *gravitas* of Victorian England. The Irish have often found the high . . . seriousness of the English irresistibly comic. Wilde is radical because he takes nothing seriously, cares only for form, appearance and pleasure, and is religiously devoted to his own self-gratification. In Victorian society, such a man did not need to bed the son of the Marquess of Queensberry to become an enemy of the State, though it can't be said to have helped. If he sometimes displays the irresponsibility of the aesthete, he also restores to us something of the true political depth of that term, as a rejection of mean-spirited utility, and a devotion to human self-fulfilment as an end in itself.

Wilde's affair with the son of the Marquess did lead to his trial and imprisonment and, eventually, his downfall. But, as Eagleton intimates, many already considered Wilde an "enemy of the State" before this; he was tried because the state knew it had a great deal of support for its actions. How could a man who wrote plays so seemingly harmless and delightfully idiotic as *An Ideal Husband* be considered a danger to the British state? Because Wilde's wit both on and off the page was as threatening and dangerous as any sword, gun, or army. Wilde relentlessly exposed the hypocrisy of the British ruling classes, even as he flattered them and loved and admired England and the English for many good reasons. His plays suggest that the members of these ruling classes were all a bit like Sir Robert Chiltern: loud in proclaiming their goodness, but quiet about their self-interested pursuit of power and wealth—wealth that so many of them accumulated, as Wilde well knew, in the great, lucrative business that was the vast British empire.

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, Critical Essay on *An Ideal Husband*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Tolerance and Compassion in *An Ideal Husband*

In *An Ideal Husband*, Oscar Wilde stitches together multiple and varied elements to produce a seamless work that remains relevant more than a century after it was written. The playwright combines scintillating wit with both farce and melodrama, creating a piece that, over the course of its four acts, offers biting social and political commentary while espousing a philosophy that has the primacy of love and compassion as its focal point. Taken together, these elements compel Wilde's audience to consider what, exactly, makes a person truly moral.

“Deliciously absurd, morally serious, profoundly sentimental, and wickedly melodramatic, it is primarily a comedy of manners about political corruption, and love” is the way Barbara Belford describes the breadth of this play in her book *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius*. And, as Mark Nichols points out in his book *The Importance of Being Oscar*, George Bernard Shaw lavished praise on *An Ideal Husband* when it first hit the stage, declaring: “In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre.”

Wilde's stiletto wit is on display throughout the play. Seemingly without effort, he produces one epigram after another. These concise, pithy, often paradoxical statements are uttered by minor and major characters alike and give *An Ideal Husband* an entirely playful sheen. Nichols notes in his book that Wilde's son Vyvyan once wrote that his father viewed words as if they were “beautiful baubles with which to play and build, as a child plays with coloured bricks.” It is an apt analogy. Wilde's wordplay provides an iridescent foundation, each epigram indeed like a beautifully colored brick that helps form the base that *An Ideal Husband* is built upon.

The baubles are indeed splendid, providing such delight that they would make this play a memorable experience no matter what plot line is constructed around them. Nichols, in fact, spends no time analyzing the story line of *An Ideal Husband*. Instead, he is content to reel from one epigram to another, as if intoxicated by each indelible line, such as the one uttered by the character Lord Goring, who observes, “When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”

Among the targets skewered by Wilde is the world of high society. Take, for example, this choice remark from the character Mabel Chiltern, who says, “Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what society should be.” As rich a subject as that might have been at the end of the Victorian era, it took some nerve for Wilde to sling verbal barbs at social circles he himself was in. This play, though, is substantially more than a collection of witty oneliners and has more philosophical meat to chew on, as well. Part of the main course, so to speak, is the issue of hypocrisy, especially as it applies to the world of politics.

Wilde's gateway into the rich turf of the political arena is the character Sir Robert Chiltern, a highranking official who built a sterling career by constantly seeking the moral high ground. His integrity is beyond reproach, and his wife Gertrude idolizes him for his goodness, honesty, and dedication to principles. But, beneath all his respectability is a dirty secret: Chiltern's wealth, and the career in public service it afforded him, derived from Chiltern selling a state secret many years before when he was still a young man. The threat of that secret being exposed by Mrs. Cheveley forms the basis of the plot for *An Ideal Husband*.

Cheveley, in possession of a highly incriminating letter that proves Sir Robert's crime, wants Chiltern to lend his support, and the credibility that goes with it, to a scam that would bilk the public treasury. She attempts to

blackmail him, threatening to expose his sordid actions if he does not provide assistance for her scheme, an action that would have him betray the public trust he has otherwise so rightly earned. The woman delights in taunting him. In doing so, she makes an observation regarding politics that still rings true today.

‘Nowadays,’ she chides, ‘with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues— and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins— one after the other.’

Politicians today are still expected to be without moral flaw, even though it is a recognized impossibility since they are only human. When those flaws are exposed, they are subjected to public humiliation and scorn. As the character Lord Goring observes, admitting one’s weaknesses and failures does nothing to appease a public that demands the impossibility of moral perfection from its politicians. Confession would be fruitless, says Goring, explaining

And if you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can’t talk morality twice a week to a large popular immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician.

Even more than the public disgrace, Chiltern fears the effect disclosure of his decades-old crime will have on his adoring wife, who, because of his perceived virtue, places him on a pedestal so high no man could ever really live up to it. Exposure of his dark secret, Sir Robert is convinced, would drive his wife away. “It would kill her love for me,” he tells Goring, a character largely modeled on Wilde himself. Goring, described as a “flawless dandy” by Wilde, provides an interesting and highly instructive counterpoint to Sir Robert. The latter publicly portrays himself to be a man of the highest moral scruples while concealing a shameful incident from his past; Goring, on the other hand, is, on the surface, Chiltern’s polar opposite. He makes no attempt whatsoever to hide what he openly admits to be his many flaws.

As Mabel Chiltern, the sister of Sir Robert who has a romantic interest in Lord Goring, says to the self-confessed gadabout, “You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.” To which he replies, “I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!” Unlike Sir Robert, Lord Goring is free of guilt. He never had to bear the heavy burden of going through life concealing an act for which he is deeply ashamed. As Sir Robert says himself, “I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth . . . to live the truth. Ah! That is the great thing in life, to live the truth.” It is just such a life that Goring has lived and is the happier for it.

Goring’s father, the crusty and cantankerous Earl of Caversham, has not a single good word to say about his son. Caversham views his son as an idler who lives only for his own pleasure. Praising Sir Robert for his “high character, high moral tone, high principles,” Caversham turns to his son and decrees, “Everything that you have not got, sir, and never will have.” The irony is that when Caversham makes this observation, the audience knows just how wrong he is on both counts. Sir Robert is not quite as completely noble as the old earl believes and his son has proved himself to have a truly sterling character. He has shown himself to be a good and steadfast friend, doing all he can to help Sir Robert out of his dire predicament and asking absolutely nothing in return. Beyond that, he does his best to help Sir Robert’s wife, Gertrude, see the error of her ways. First, at the point when he knows the truth of her husband’s scandal and she does not, he encourages her to moderate her unrealistic view of Sir Robert as an absolute paragon of virtue, telling her that in “every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness.” Goring urges Lady Chiltern to gain some degree of compassion and not expect her husband to be flawless.

‘All I do know,’ says Goring, ‘is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next.’

Later, after Lord Goring has saved the day by thwarting Mrs. Cheveley's attempt at blackmail, Lady Chiltern, who has indeed followed Goring's advice and forgiven her husband for his moral lapse, nonetheless pushes Sir Robert to do what she considers the honorable thing and withdraw from public life. Again, Goring steps in and provides astute counsel, saying that her urging of Sir Robert to meet an impossibly high standard by abandoning all that he has worked for is a terrible mistake. Goring says to Gertrude

'Do you want to kill his love for you? What sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his ambition, if you take him from the splendour of a great political career, if you close the doors of public life against him, if you condemn him to sterile failure, he who was made for triumph and success. Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment is their mission.'

She again takes his advice, and all ends happily. Sir Robert's political success is assured. He and Gertrude have grown closer than ever, their love all the stronger because it is based in reality instead of some idealized fiction. As director Peter Hall wrote in a 1992 piece he penned for London's *The Guardian* newspaper, Wilde made it clear that Sir Robert's crime was clearly foolish, but along with condemnation came forgiveness. "Through the character of Lord Goring," writes Hall, "Wilde expresses his tolerance: 'Nobody's incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.'" Noting that audiences continued to respond positively to *An Ideal Husband* a century after it was first staged, Hall concludes, "The play lives not because of its wit but because of its compassion."

Source: Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on *An Ideal Husband*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

The Action of the Comedies

Wilde's least successful play on the stage and his third comedy, *An Ideal Husband*, was written between October 1893 and March 1894. It was produced at the Haymarket Theatre on January 3, 1895. When Wilde in 1899 corrected the proofs of the play for publication, he said that it "reads rather well, and some of its passages seem prophetic of tragedy to come." But Sir Robert Chiltern's predicament, though it bears a tenuous resemblance to Wilde's, has distinctive melodramatic overtones.

The play concerns itself primarily with Sir Robert Chiltern's past misdeed on which his fortune and eminent reputation now stand. The past, in the form of Mrs. Cheveley's immoral ends, revives in order to haunt and threaten him. Just as, in the three other plays, the past proves a force that motivates the thematic action, so here time seems to be the concept that governs the complication and resolution of the plot. The play deals with the problem of how well man, confronted with the alterable modes of his life, can adjust or adapt himself to the needs of changing situations. Where an absolute standard is obeyed despite the criticism of it by experience and actuality, there result irony, distortions, and absurdities that arouse ridicule and laughter.

Notice first how the scenes of the play shift from the "social" crowded atmosphere of the Octagon Room at Chiltern's house (Act I) to a "private" room (Act II), then to the secluded library of Lord Goring where the two letters—the fatal letter of Sir Robert Chiltern and Lady Chiltern's letter to Lord Goring—play decisive roles. The scene finally returns to the setting of Act II, where social and private interests intersect; where all the rough, disturbing edges of the misunderstanding between husband and wife are smoothed off by obvious devices—by means of the diamond brooch that Lord Goring uses to restrain Mrs. Cheveley, and by Mrs. Cheveley's stupidity in not explaining to Chiltern the nature of the letter his wife wrote to Lord Goring. Eventually the play closes with a sense of new life for the Chilterns, while Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern entertain the prospect of a happy marriage. The image of a stable society prevails in the end, as the conventions of marriage, family life, and public office are severally affirmed.

When Act I opens, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, “types of exquisite fragility,” display their “affectations of manner” which, however, do not make their remarks pointless:

MRS. MARCHMONT: Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

LADY BASILDON: Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

Mabel Chiltern states in ironic terms the combination of polished form and hollow insides that society presents: “Oh, I love London society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what society should be.” Her indictment gains pungent venom in Lord Caversham's opinion that London society “has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.”

Dress or fashion furnishes an index to social attitudes and values. Lord Goring pronounces: “fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.” When he offers to give Mrs. Cheveley “some good advice,” she replies: “Oh! pray don't. One should never give a woman anything that she can't wear in the evening.” The interest in appearance occupies the foreground in this exchange:

MRS. CHEVELEY (*languidly*): I have never read a Blue Book, I prefer books . . . in yellow covers.

LADY MARKBY (*genially unconscious*): Yellow is a gayer colour, is it not? I used to wear yellow a good deal in my early days, and would do so now if Sir John was not so painfully personal in his observations, and a man on the question of dress is always ridiculous, is he not?

Politics is a kind of “fashion,” too, in its concern with public appearance. Lady Basildon claims to talk politics ceaselessly. Sir Robert Chiltern regards a political life as “a noble career,” though our knowledge of his past belies his statement. But in the political or practical life, the criterion of success reduces moral standards to the basic level of pragmatic efficacy. As Lord Goring puts it, “in practical life there is something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always.”

In Act IV, Lady Chiltern believes that Sir Robert's ambition has led him astray in his early days. She says that “power is nothing in itself. It is power to do good that is fine.” Her husband admits to Lord Goring that he “bought success at a great price.” And yet he is highly esteemed for being a respectable, selfless “public servant,” a model of virtue, which is but a “front” or mask that he wears in conformity to social norms. After all, as Lord Goring remarks, almost all private fortune in society has come from dubious “speculation.” On knowing her husband's guilt, Lady Chiltern hysterically complains not of his pretense but of his inability to “lie” to her for the sake of “virtues” he has been socially known for. Lady Chiltern cries out,

Don't touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me forever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible, painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a common thief were better. You put yourself up for sale to the highest bidder! You were bought in the market. You lied to the whole world. And yet you will not lie to me!

This exposure means a stripping of costume, an “undressing,” to disclose the authentic self. One recalls Lady Markby's experience, which prefigures Sir Robert's plight, when she describes the result of immersion in the crowd:

The fact is, we all scramble and jostle so much nowadays that I wonder we have anything at all left on us at the end of an evening. I know myself that, when I am coming back from the Drawing Room, I always feel as if I hadn't a shred on me, except a small shred of decent reputation just enough to prevent the lower classes making painful observations through the windows of the carriage.

Behind Sir Robert's open "goodness" lies a secret "truth," the as yet unacknowledged truth of human frailty. He has committed an immoral act in order to insure his social success.

Act I gives us the needed background information about the moral issue. Mrs. Cheveley remarks: "Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues." She threatens Sir Robert:

Yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it. If it were known that as a young man, secretary to a great and important minister, you sold a Cabinet secret for a large sum of money, and that was the origin of your wealth and career, you would be hounded out of public life. you would disappear completely. . . . You have a splendid position but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable.

She elaborates on the punishment that the fallen victim is bound to receive from society:

Suppose that when I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and give them this scandal and the proofs of it! I think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.

Ironically Lady Chiltern thinks that her husband has no "secrets" from her.

Confronted with his "shameful" secret, Sir Robert Chiltern reflects on how most men have "worse secrets in their own lives." Lord Goring himself, in planning to thwart Mrs. Cheveley's designs, believes that "everyone has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one of us." Aware of human limitations, he allows for imperfections in men. Observation, if not experience, has taught him that the "ideal husband" is a myth. He says to Lady Chiltern in Act II:

I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps you are a little hard in some of your views on life. I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient allowances. In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness.

Just as Sir Robert has a "past," so does his enemy Mrs. Cheveley. She ceases to be a mystery when Lady Chiltern recalls her as a schoolmate: "She was untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence on everyone whose trust or friendship she could win. . . . She stole things, she was a thief. She was sent away for being a thief." Lord Goring discovers later that she has stolen the diamond brooch he has given to a friend. Thus Mrs. Cheveley is not without her secret crime, of which Lord Goring accuses her later. Her image as an intriguing woman who "makes great demands on one's curiosity" is soon modified by the knowledge we get of her past life, her origin; she, who claims to possess integrity, turns out to be an embodiment of corruption.

It seems that the past, what is dead and forgotten, is always valuable for the perspective of the comic vision. The past qualifies man's pride; it gives an objective picture of any man's life. Whereas the past judges man in his finitude, the future gives him the freedom of choosing his possible, ideal selves. Mrs. Cheveley proves the most vulnerable character because, as she declares, her "memory is under admirable control." The one

real tragedy in a woman's life, she says, is the fact that "her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband." Sir Robert, of course, is the "man" with a future, as Mabel Chiltern says; but his future rests on his past. When Mrs. Cheveley enters the scene, he starts reflecting on life:

It is fair that the folly, the sin of one's youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have worked for, all that I have built up? Is it fair, Arthur?

Lord Goring replies: "Life is never fair, Robert. And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not."

What is the danger that life confronts us with? It is the danger of having an open mind, an equipoise within, a balance which comes from a just calculation of the factors that affect one's life. When Lord Goring suggests that Sir Robert alter his wife's fixed views on life, Sir Robert replies: "All such experiments are terribly dangerous." Lord Goring, however, counters: "Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn't so, life wouldn't be worth living." He entertains, in short, the surprises and novelties that organic life is ever producing. In Act IV, life puts Lady Chiltern's reputation in danger. We see how Sir Robert becomes desperate, then panicked: "I clutch at every chance. I feel like a man on a ship that is sinking." The disaster being still on the level of conjecture, his interjections are maudlin: "My life seems to have crumbled about me. I am a ship without a rudder in a night without a star." This radically qualifies the role of Sir Robert is a man with a "serious purpose in life," a "pattern husband." Lady Chiltern amplifies her husband's image:

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses.

"Lines of intellect" versus "curves of emotion"—this opposition involves society's failure to establish harmonious relations between men and women. It involves a milieu in which the accepted codes of behavior do not promote the sensibility of men to function integrally. Wilde's portrayal of his "ideal husband" sets directly the contrast between feeling and conscious thought, between perceived behavior and the groping, reckless inner self:

The note of his manner is that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power.

Sir Robert Chiltern speaks in character when he insists on the idea of a compartmentalized life: "... public and private life are different things. They have different laws, and move on different lines."

Elsewhere men are called "horribly selfish" and "grossly material." Despite Sir Robert Chiltern's show of qualms and vacillation, Mrs. Cheveley is assured that he is "most susceptible to reason"—by which she means that he readily succumbs to fear of social disapproval. Women are gifted with "the moral sense." Lady Markby prefers anything other than "high intellectual pressure." To Lord Caversham, "common sense is the privilege" of men; in his view, marriage is a matter not of affection but of common sense. Mrs. Cheveley herself separates "business" from "silver twilights or rose-pink dawns." She considers being "natural" the most difficult pose of all. She holds that there is a wide gap between the rational method of science and the irrational layer of experience:

MRS. CHEVELEY: Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women . . . merely adored.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do.

The double aspects of life seem to be focused in Mrs. Cheveley's mysterious identity. Lord Goring describes her as "a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night." She plays with the attitudes of optimism and pessimism. What after all is the real self of a person? Lady Chiltern cannot believe her husband to be guilty of dreadful things which are "so unlike [his] real self." Her idealized image of him is that he has "brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher ideals." But reality is never as simple and pure as Lady Chiltern would like to imagine it. Society has become "dreadfully mixed" for Mrs. Cheveley; Lady Markby likewise, observes that "families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else." Just as society is complex, so truth—as Sir Robert Chiltern believes—is a very complex thing.

To the unbending, puritanical Lady Chiltern, life however appears simple and fixed. She has always been noted for her stingy exclusiveness and conservatism. She has remained unaffected by changing circumstances:

MRS. CHEVELEY: I see that after all these years you have not changed a bit, Gertrude.

LADY CHILTERN: I never change.

MRS. CHEVELEY (elevating her eyebrows): Then life has taught you nothing?

LADY CHILTERN: It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonorable action may be guilty of it a second time and should be shunned.

MRS. CHEVELEY: Would you apply that rule to everyone?

LADY CHILTERN: Yes, to everyone, without exception.

We know of course that Sir Robert has changed. Mrs. Cheveley, though shrewder and more worldlywise, has not reformed her ways. With firm logic Lady Chiltern holds to her conviction that human beings are what they are, past or present; that human nature is predestined, and is permanently fixed. She accuses Mrs. Cheveley of being dishonest on the basis of her past conduct:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: Gertrude what you tell me may be true, but it happened many years ago. It is best forgotten! Mrs. Cheveley may have changed since then. No one should be entirely judged by his past.

LADY CHILTERN (sadly): One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: That is a hard saying, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN: It is a true saying, Robert. . . .

Like her counterparts in the other plays, Lady Windermere and Hester Worsley, Lady Chiltern does not believe that the sinner can make amends or work for his redemption. Addicted to histrionics, she often forgets the harsh prosaic facts of experience which are necessary to obtain an adequate understanding of human nature.

In contrast with her tolerant husband, Lady Chiltern acts without regard for the variable situations of life. Sir Robert Chiltern, it must be stressed, conceives himself changed since his early indiscretion on the ground that "circumstances alter things." But his wife decrees otherwise: "Circumstances should never alter principles," Nonetheless, life's circumstances play a joke on her: when Sir Robert, in Act I, asks Mrs. Cheveley what brought her into his life in order to destroy his reputation and family honor, she answers: "Circumstances." Accident makes Robert negligent to the extent that he leaves the incriminating letter in Baron Arnheim's possession. And the accident of circumstance makes Mrs. Cheveley drop her diamond brooch, thus giving Lord Goring a weapon to prove her guilty of theft. On the whole, life offers chances to qualify, change, or confirm the truths and beliefs men hold. Sir Robert, for instance, speaks of the "wonderful chance" the Baron gave him to enrich himself unscrupulously. Later, he would bank on the "chance" that some scandal might be found involving his blackmailer Mrs. Cheveley. Desperately he exclaims: "Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance."

We have noted previously the objective of success as a controlling force in Sir Robert's life. Early in his career he has been told that "luxury was nothing but background, a painted scene in a play"; what matters is power based on wealth. To be sure, he has never truly regretted his youthful crime. But the opportunity to acquire wealth unscrupulously he denies to others. Success, the chief social criterion of value, is parodied in the humorous puns on "triumph"; for example, Mabel Chiltern mentions a tableau in which she and Lady Chiltern are participants:

You remember, we are having a tableaux, don't you? The triumph of something, I don't know what! I hope it will be the triumph of me. Only triumph I am really interested in at present.

Wilde describes the stage decoration in Act I: "Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights, which illumine a large eighteenth century French tapestry—representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher—that is stretched on the staircase wall." At the close of Act III, we see Mrs. Cheveley's face "illumined with evil triumph." What triumphs of course is the comic situation.

If the function of comedy is to reaffirm due proportion in life and restore "the golden mean," it is imperative that the "rules" for social existence be carefully defined. An attempt at this definition exists in Wilde's play, Sir Robert tries to expose Mrs. Cheveley's plan for a "swindle" instead of a "speculation": "let us call things by their proper names." Eventually she turns the table over him:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: It is infamous, what you propose—infamous!

MRS. CHEVELEY: Oh, no! This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert, sooner or later.

When he agrees on a bargain, with his support of her speculation in exchange for the incriminating letter, she says: "I intend to play quite fairly with you. One should always play fairly . . . when one has the winning cards."

Both the “game of life” and blackmail suggest commercial exchange, bargaining, profit and loss. Allusions and metaphors drawn from trade and finance are interwoven in the verbal fabric of the play. In Act I, Mrs. Cheveley appraises people according to their “price”: “My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive,” Later she exhorts him: “Years ago you did a clever, unscrupulous thing; it turned out a great success. You owe it to your fortune and position. And now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we all have to pay for what we do. You have to pay now.” Offered a bribe, she refuses: “Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is.” To Lady Chiltern, “money that comes from a tainted source is a degradation.” Sir Robert confesses that while he did not sell himself for money, he “bought success at a great price.” Lord Goring thinks that he “paid a great price for it.” In his remorse, Sir Robert Chiltern vows that he has “paid conscience money many times” for his mistake, Mrs. Cheveley’s transaction with Sir Robert, in Lord Goring’s opinion, is a “loathsome commercial transaction of a loathsome commercial age.” Mrs. Cheveley admits that much: “It is a commercial transaction. That is all. There is no good mixing up sentimentality in it. I offered to sell Robert Chiltern a certain thing. If he won’t pay me my price, he will have to pay the world a greater price.”

So in the middle of the play Sir Robert Chiltern is threatened with scandal and ruin because of what he did in the past. He declares that he has fought the century with its own weapon, wealth. He has shown the courage, cunning, and strength to yield to temptations: “To stake all one’s life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no weakness in that. There is a horrible, terrible courage.” Lord Goring’s dandyism, his allowances for human vices and shortcomings, vindicate Sir Robert’s resolution to defy Mrs. Cheveley. When Mrs. Cheveley boasts that she knows Sir Robert’s “real character” by virtue of his letter, Lord Goring replies: “What you know about him is not his real character. It was an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore . . . not his true character.” Of the Chilterns’ intended withdrawal from public life despite his promotion to a Cabinet post, Lord Goring remarks: “We men and women are not made to accept such sacrifice from each other. We are not worthy of them.”

In the “flawless dandy” Lord Goring, we perceive the lineaments of “the ideal husband”—at least to Mabel Chiltern, in the future. He has a humaneness absent from his literary predecessors like Lord Henry Wotton, Lord Darlington, and Lord Illingworth. The dandy, in general, enacts the cult of the self not only in thought but also in the taste for dress and material elegance. He supports ceremony and social manners in principle. If he is anarchic, that is because he feels secure within the confines of society. Gestures and dress suggest the rhythm and harmony of a mind which depends on “the peculiar pleasure of astonishing and the proud satisfaction of never being astonished.” Seriousness, or hypocrisy, is the “unbecoming” cardinal vice. As a clown armed with trivialities, the dandy exemplifies the value of external form as the emblem of what is within the self; he dissolves any disparity between the moral and the physical aspects of life. Lord Goring, in particular, abhors all romantic ideals, just as the dandies of the other comedies do. Pursuing a “gentleman’s” routine, he exhibits “all the delicate fopperies of Fashion.” Compared with Phipps the “ideal butler,” the “mask with a manner,” who represents “the dominance of form,” Lord Goring has *élan vital*: “He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. . . . One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it.” Mabel Chiltern, whose good sense springs from a feeling for just proportion in matters of daily life, does not desire Lord Goring to be an “ideal husband.” For she feels that “he can be what he chooses”; her only wish is to be “a real wife to him.” The significance of the adjective “real” inheres in a flexibility of attitude to life, in the knowledge of human limitations—a knowledge of which the “ideal husband” must have a good share.

Source: Epifanio San Juan Jr., “The Action of the Comedies,” in *Oscar Wilde*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1985, pp. 45–76.

Feasting with Panthers: The Rise and Fall of *Oscar Wilde*

An Ideal Husband opened in London on January 3, 1895. Although considerably longer than either *Lady Windermere's Fan* or *A Woman of No Importance*, it proved to be an enormous success. When the Prince of Wales sent for Wilde on the opening night, the flattered playwright remarked that he would have to cut some of the scenes. "Pray do not take out a single word," said the Prince, and Wilde was more than happy to leave the play as it was. While a modern audience is likely to be more critical, it cannot be denied that *An Ideal Husband* is much better crafted than either of Wilde's earlier comedies. Indeed, no less a judge than George Bernard Shaw was moved by this work to pronounce Wilde "our only thorough playwright."

The play centers around a group of characters who have by now grown into easily recognizable types. Once again we have a woman of high moral principle—Lady Chiltern. We have a character with a secret past (her husband, Sir Robert Chiltern), a dandy (Lord Goring), and a fashionable woman of questionable reputation, Mrs. Cheveley. But these characters show a new degree of depth. If Lady Chiltern is a good woman, she is seldom so one dimensional as Mrs. Arbuthnot. And if Lord Goring affects a dandylike pose, he is much more complex than either Lord Darlington or Lord Illingworth.

Sir Robert Chiltern is "the ideal husband" referred to in the title of the play. Lady Chiltern can see in him no wrong: "He is not like other men," she tells Lord Goring. "Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing." Lord Goring knows better and argues,

I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps you are a little too hard in some of your views on life In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.

As the action of the play unfolds, this is precisely the lesson that Lady Chiltern—like Lady Windermere before her—must learn.

Years earlier, when he was an ambitious young man serving as private secretary to a cabinet minister, Robert Chiltern had learned that the British government was about to purchase the Suez Canal. He sold this secret to a speculator three days before the news was made public, and was paid, for this tip, over one hundred thousand pounds—easily half a million dollars in today's currency. This sum formed the basis for his subsequent career. As the play begins, he is under secretary of state for foreign affairs, widely admired as a man of moral stature, and almost certainly destined to become prime minister one day.

Unfortunately, there exists against him one piece of evidence—the original letter advising purchase of Suez Canal stock. This letter has fallen into the hands of Mrs. Cheveley, an adventuress whom Wilde describes as "a work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools." Mrs. Cheveley has invested heavily in a scheme to promote a canal in South America, a scheme Sir Robert is preparing to denounce, in the House of Commons, as a swindle. Mrs. Cheveley is determined to keep Sir Robert from making this speech; she demands that he suppress his report and say a few words to the effect that the canal, if completed, may be of great international value. Unless he agrees to do so, Mrs. Cheveley will make public the incriminating letter that she possesses, thus effectively ruining Sir Robert's career and his marriage to a woman who will allow no compromise with deceit.

Greatly troubled, Sir Robert agrees to do as he has been told, but then he is confronted by his wife, who tells him that she had known Mrs. Cheveley when they were girls at school together:

LADY CHILTERN: She was untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence on everyone whose trust or friendship she could win. I hated her, I despised her. She stole things, she was a thief. She

was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?

SIR ROBERT: Gertrude, what you tell me may be true, but it happened many years ago. It is best forgotten! Mrs. Cheveley may have changed since then. No one should be entirely judged by his past.

LADY CHILTERN: One's past is what one is. It's the only way by which people should be judged.

The irony of this exchange is that both characters are wrong. Mrs. Cheveley is no better than she was as a girl—if anything, she is much worse, and Lady Chiltern is right to judge her by her past. But in taking such an absolute position, in arguing that everyone should be judged by the past, she has condemned her own husband, unaware that he has a past that he has kept concealed from her.

Convinced that he will lose his wife's love if he tells her the truth, Sir Robert assures her that he has never done anything dishonorable and that he will make his original speech as planned. Unfortunately, the scandal cannot be contained. When Lady Chiltern tells Mrs. Cheveley, "Leave my house. You are unfit to enter it," Mrs. Cheveley strikes back:

Your house! A house bought with the price of dishonour. A house, everything in which has been paid for by fraud. Ask him what the origin of his fortune is! Get him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret. Learn from him to what you owe your position.

Vowing once again to make her information public, Mrs. Cheveley leaves Sir Robert to the reproaches of his wife in a scene that reveals the essence of the play. Lady Chiltern takes refuge in theatrics:

Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me forever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible, painted mask! You sold yourself for money And how I worshipped you! You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and goodness more real because you lived. And now—Oh, when I think that I made of a man like you my ideal, the ideal of my life!

Even a nineteenth-century audience would recognize that Lady Chiltern has gone too far. Because she demanded the impossible of her husband—perfection—she has catapulted from one extreme to another, from unreasoning adoration to unreasonable contempt. There is no question that Sir Robert has done a serious wrong. But our sympathies turn to him when he explains that he never wanted to be an ideal, that he would have preferred to be loved for what he is:

It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now And now what is there before me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a lonely, dishonoured death Let women make no more ideals of men! let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!

There is, to be sure, an element of melodrama here. But the scene is nonetheless powerful and the lesson clear. Once again, we find Wilde condemning absolutes and pleading for tolerance in a world that is apt to be harsh.

At this point, the plot becomes increasingly complicated. Lord Goring had once urged Lady Chiltern to turn to him if she ever found herself in need of a friend. And now, at the beginning of Act III, he receives a note from her reading “I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you,” from which he rightly deduces that Lady Chiltern has learned her husband’s secret. As he prepares to receive her and urge her to stand by her husband, Lord Goring is interrupted by a visit from his father. Goring instructs his butler, “There is a lady coming to see me this evening on particular business. Show her into the drawing room when she arrives,” and he retires offstage with his father. Mrs. Cheveley now appears, and believing that this must be the woman his employer is expecting, the butler ushers her into the drawing room. Once there, she discovers the letter Goring has just received from Lady Chiltern, which she takes as proof that they are having an affair. Sir Robert Chiltern now arrives upon the scene, anxious to have the advice of a man he respects. But when he discovers Mrs. Cheveley in Lord Goring’s house, he is convinced that his best friend is in league with his worst enemy, and he leaves in disgust.

Mrs. Cheveley now makes an unexpected request. She tells Lord Goring that she will surrender Sir Robert’s letter if Goring will agree to marry her. And here the already complex plot takes still another twist. We have known since Act I that Mrs. Cheveley has lost a diamond and ruby brooch. This brooch is now in Lord Goring’s possession, and he shows it to her, asking if it is hers. She claims it with delight, and he fastens it to her arm, explaining that it was really designed as a bracelet with a secret spring. Once she has the bracelet on, Mrs. Cheveley cannot remove it because she does not understand how the spring works. Lord Goring knows how to work it because he had originally bought the bracelet as a gift for a cousin from whom it had been stolen ten years earlier. He threatens to expose Mrs. Cheveley as the thief unless she yields up Sir Robert’s incriminating letter. She does so, but she holds fast to Lady Chiltern’s letter, finding consolation in the thought that if she cannot ruin Sir Robert’s career, she can at least ruin his marriage.

All of these complications are finally resolved in the fourth and last act. When Mrs. Cheveley sends Lady Chiltern’s letter to Sir Robert, Sir Robert assumes that the letter has come to him direct from his wife. Believing that his wife is prepared to forgive him, he seeks her out and discovers that this is indeed the case. Determined to make the play end happily, Wilde omits any further mention of the wicked Mrs. Cheveley. Lord Goring proposes marriage to Sir Robert’s younger sister and ward, and we are told that Sir Robert has been asked to join the Cabinet in recognition of his brilliant speech denouncing the South American canal scheme. Lady Chiltern kisses her husband and promises, “For both of us a new life is beginning.” And on that happy note, the curtain falls.

If Lady Chiltern is able to forgive her husband, it is because she learns that she was wrong to expect him to be perfect. The notion of “an ideal husband” is introduced comically at first—a minor character complains: “My Reginald is hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest excitement in knowing him.” But we know that Wilde is serious in encouraging his audience to resist the temptation to romanticize. It is particularly dangerous to insist on ideals, if ideals mean an inability to compromise:

SIR ROBERT: Arthur, I couldn’t tell my wife . . . she would have turned from me in horror
. . . .

LORD GORING: Is Lady Chiltern as perfect as all that?

SIR ROBERT: Yes; my wife is as perfect as all that.

LORD GORING: What a pity!

To be perfect is to be rigid and incapable of human feeling. Life cannot be lived according to absolutes; we must learn to be flexible and willing to change. Lady Chiltern boasts that she never changes, and even so

unsympathetic a character as Mrs. Cheveley is moved to say, “Then life has taught you nothing . . . I am sorry for you Gertrude, very sorry for you.”

As late as Act IV, however, Lady Chiltern reveals an almost fatal rigidity. Although it is clear that her husband regrets his one and only sin, and although she recognizes that she loves him still, she urges him to retire from public life. Because his public life is based upon “a lie,” it is his “duty” to give it up, regardless of his power for doing good so long as he is in office. But once again Lord Goring steps forward as the voice of tolerance:

You love Robert. Do you want to kill his love for you? What sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his ambition . . . Rather than lose your love, Robert would do anything, wreck his whole career, as he is on the brink of doing now. He is making for you a terrible sacrifice. Take my advice, Lady Chiltern, and do not accept a sacrifice so great. If you do, you will live to repent it bitterly. We men and women are not made to accept such sacrifices from each other.

Lady Chiltern is wise enough to accept this advice, thus ensuring a stronger and happier future for her marriage. She has learned not to demand an “ideal husband.”

Returning to this theme on a lighter note in the final scene of the play, Wilde makes Lord Goring’s father counsel the imminent bridegroom to become an “ideal husband.” But Goring’s young fiancée has the sense to declare:

An ideal husband! Oh, I don’t think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world. He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . a real wife to him.

Feminists might well argue that women get the raw end of this deal, but it would be a mistake to see the play as urging women to forgive their husbands no matter what they do. If *An Ideal Husband* focuses upon the need to be tolerant of the shortcomings of men, it is only because Wilde had already made a similar plea for women in his two preceding plays. He urges men and women alike to accept one another as they are and not to place one another “on monstrous pedestals,” because “we all have feet of clay, women as well as men.”

The two men who figure the most prominently in this play deserve careful consideration. Sir Robert Chiltern is, as we have seen, a character with a past. But he is much more complex than either Mrs. Erlynne or Mrs. Arbuthnot. Mrs. Erlynne has more or less outlived her scandal; although she expresses remorse in the memorable confrontation with her daughter, she has put her past behind her in order to devote herself to gaining an untroubled future. Mrs. Arbuthnot, on the other hand, dwells almost exclusively in the past. Her sin was the single great event in her life, and she nurses its memory, determined to live a life of constant self-abnegation. If one woman is too little troubled by her past, the other is troubled too much, and compared to Sir Robert Chiltern, both are relatively one-dimensional.

Sir Robert is recognizably human. He is capable of wallowing in self-pity:

I sold, like a common huckster, the secret that had been intrusted to me by a man of honour. I thank heaven poor Lord Radley died without knowing that I betrayed him. I would to God I had died before I had been so terribly tempted, or fallen so low.

We know that this is insincere. Regardless of any remorse he may feel, he sees the past in proportion and is determined to fight to maintain his position in the world. When he is honest, he admits “I felt that I had fought the century with its own weapons, and won.” And when Lord Goring rebukes him for having been so

weak, he refuses to respond with platitudes:

Weak? Oh, I am sick of hearing that phrase. Sick of using it about others. Weak? Do you really think, Arthur, that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that it requires strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no weakness in that. There is horrible, terrible courage.

But then, reflecting upon the vulnerability of his success, he concludes, "I remember having read somewhere that when the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers." This is no cardboard figure, but a real man feeling an intriguing mixture of grief and anger. He neither offends us with indifference nor bores us with hysterics, and it is satisfying to find him redeemed by the end of the play.

Because Sir Robert is basically good, there is no need for him to be publicly humiliated. But he has only narrowly escaped from a real danger, as Mrs. Cheveley reminds us. Speaking of the newspapers, she envisions what would eventually come to pass in Wilde's own life:

Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.

The charge of public hypocrisy is repeated by Sir Robert, who reflects bitterly upon how he would be scorned by "men who, each one of them, have worse secrets in their own lives." And we should not be misled by the lightness of Lord Goring's response: "That is the reason they are so pleased to find out other people's secrets. It distracts public attention from their own."

Sir Robert Chiltern's fear of public ruin might well be Wilde's own. The play was written only a year before its author found himself in court, a time when Wilde was afflicted with a strong sense of his own impending doom. Describing *An Ideal Husband* in a letter to a friend, Wilde observed: "It reads rather well, and some of its passages seem prophetic of tragedy to come." But while Wilde clearly identified with Sir Robert, it would be a mistake to see that character as the sole voice of Wilde's point of view within the play.

If as a popular public figure hovering on the brink of disgrace Sir Robert finds himself in a position that was analagous to Wilde's, Lord Goring represents the way Wilde liked to see himself. Of all Wilde's dandies, Goring is by far the most interesting. Although he chooses to show himself as shallow to those who do not interest him, he is, as we are allowed to see, both wise and kind.

Wilde says that Goring is "clever, but would not like to be thought so He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage." He likes to stand apart from life in order to better understand it, but he is also capable of action when those he loves need help.

Throughout the play, we see two Lord Gorings: one is the glib young man who likes to scandalize dowagers at lengthy dinner parties; the other is the loyal friend who never fails to offer wise counsel. He can be irritatingly trivial—"To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance"—but this is, for the most part, a manner that he assumes in order to avoid sentimentality. He is easily embarrassed by the expression of feeling. When Sir Robert tries to thank him for his help, he retreats, characteristically, into the facile: "Ah! the truth is a thing I get rid of as soon as possible! Bad habit by the way. Makes one unpopular at the club"

In Lord Goring, Wilde created a character very much like himself. Like Wilde, Goring lies about his age, claims to worship youth, is easily bored, and appears to be selfish. But as a recent critic has shown, Goring

is also a kind of providence who settles all troubles by quick brainwork and utter detachment. Outwardly a dandy and an idler, he is inwardly a philosopher, even a man of action and decision if need be. All Wilde's friends remarked that in spite of his frivolous attitude towards life . . . his advice in mundane affairs was singularly shrewd, and each of these characteristics is given to Goring.

The philosopher would not be possible without the dandy. It is the seemingly idle life that leaves the dandy free to observe his fellow men, and observation is the beginning of wisdom.

Thus both Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern should be seen as representing different aspects of Wilde's own character. One represents the dandified self, which sees itself as superior to social norms and entitled to complete freedom; the other, the sinner with a guilty conscience who admits that he has done wrong but argues that he should not be punished. Speaking in the person of Sir Robert, Wilde

admits that he has sinned in rejecting the mores of society. He insists, however, that he has remained uncorrupted at heart and begs society for pardon and acceptance. Speaking as Lord Goring . . . Wilde disdains that society and demands absolute freedom for the expression of the self. He denies the existence of evil and good and maintains that the only realities are ugliness and beauty.

Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *An Ideal Husband* reveals the conflict of the divided self. Wilde wanted to be loved and accepted by the very people he loved to taunt. In simple terms, he did not know what he wanted—the source, perhaps, of his personal misfortune, but also the source of much that gives interest to his work.

Of the three plays discussed in this chapter, *An Ideal Husband* is unquestionably the most serious. Technically it is a comedy, because it ends happily. But there is very little humor in the play beyond an occasional epigram, and the business of the diamond bracelet is distinctly melodramatic. Nonetheless, *An Ideal Husband* shows considerable improvement over Wilde's earlier plays in both construction and characterization. If it lacks the brilliant dialogue one usually associates with Wilde, it clearly has the substance with which he is seldom credited. Wilde was to write only one more play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But within *An Ideal Husband*, there are moments of high drama that make one wonder what new directions Wilde might have pursued had his career not ended so precipitously. This is his best play but one.

Source: Robert Keith Miller, "Feasting with Panthers: The Rise and Fall of *Oscar Wilde*," in *Oscar Wilde*, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982, pp. 1–24.

The Drama

An Ideal Husband, according to Frank Harris, was based on a story that he had told Wilde about Disraeli's making money by entrusting the Rothschilds with the purchase of Suez Canal shares. Pearson discounts the significance of Harris' claim by arguing that "Sardou must have suggested it to Harris, as it is to be found in that playwright's *Dora*." *An Ideal Husband* was first performed at the Theater Royal, Haymarket, on January 3, 1895, with great success. Henry James, whose own play *Guy Domville* also opened the same night, saw Wilde's play at its opening. He felt the play was "so helpless, so crude, so bad, so clumsy, feeble, and vulgar" that he wondered "How *can* my piece do anything with a public with whom *that* is a success?" James was at least partly right, for his own play closed February 2 to make room for the *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde's third comedy, *An Ideal Husband*, presents in Lady Chiltern another Puritan who cannot forgive anyone who has ever done a wicked or shameful deed. Her husband Robert, whom she idealizes, has long ago made his fortune by dishonorably selling a government secret. Mrs. Cheveley, a dishonest former school acquaintance of Lady Chiltern, attempts to blackmail Sir Robert into supporting a fraudulent Argentine canal project. Sir Robert is certain he will lose his wife if his secret is revealed, but Lord Goring, the Wildean dandy, encourages him to fight Mrs. Cheveley. When Lady Chiltern learns of her husband's past, she castigates him and rejects his pleas for forgiveness. Later, Lord Goring receives a seemingly compromising letter from Lady Chiltern. By confronting Mrs. Cheveley with a diamond brooch she had stolen, Lord Goring obtains the damaging letter Sir Robert had written long ago that revealed his guilt, but Mrs. Cheveley obtains Lady Chiltern's letter and declares her intention to send it to Sir Robert that night. The next day Sir Robert officially denounces the fraudulent canal scheme and is reunited with his wife. The letter Mrs. Cheveley had sent had been an affectionate and forgiving one that had been intended for him all along. Lord Goring wins the lovely Mabel Chiltern while Lady Chiltern discovers that "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing."

Although Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, like *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, centers around a conflict caused by a wife or fiancée's unyielding moral rigidity, the manner in which the dandy is related to this conflict is quite new. The dandy in Wilde's two earlier comedies was a dangerous though charming villain. Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* nearly succeeds in breaking up a marriage. Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* is a betrayer of women. Both figures, however, function as spokesmen for the dandiacal way of life and, on occasion, as Wildean commentators.

When in the earlier plays these figures are discredited as the conventionally moral plots demanded, there is some question in the reader's mind about the concomitant condemnation of their dandiacal message. Such a divided reaction Wilde surely did not intend. More likely Wilde was attempting to write plays that would be appreciated and understood by both Philistine and cognoscente at two different levels. Lord Goring, however, in *An Ideal Husband* represents a significant development in Wilde's treatment of the dandy. Although he retains his role as dandy and Wildean commentator, he loses the usual role as villain. Mrs. Cheveley has assumed this function. Wilde retains the woman with the past, but in this case she sins more than she is sinned against. Another vestigial remainder of the villainous dandy can be discovered in Baron Arnheim. Although, we never meet him, we learn that he is an aesthete of exquisite tastes who early seduced Lord Chiltern to his doctrine of wealth. At the close of the play, when Sir Robert Chiltern is about to terminate his political career with his wife's misguided acquiescence, it is Lord Goring's long sermon on the roles of men and women which saves the day: "Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission." Wilde could hardly realize how unacceptable such role distinctions would be for us today, but he is clearly reflecting the views of the mass of Englishmen of his time. Thus, the dandy has lost his sting.

In *An Ideal Husband* Wilde realigns his characters in such a way that, for the first time, the villain (villainess in this case) is an antagonist of the dandy. Mrs. Cheveley, in spite of her role as heavy, is as much a dandy as Lord Goring. Mrs. Cheveley, who is "a work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools, like Lord Goring, believes that life is a pose:

Sir Robert Chiltern: To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be an impertinence. But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.

Mrs. Cheveley: Oh, I'm neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

Sir Robert Chiltern: You prefer to be natural?

Mrs. Cheveley: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

Mrs. Cheveley, who prefers books in “yellow covers,” sees life as an art form. In a conversation with Mrs. Markby, another dandy in a play where the dandies outnumber the Philistines, she expounds Wilde’s view of life as an art form:

Mrs. Cheveley: . . . Fathers have so much to learn from their sons nowadays.

Lady Markby: Really, dear? What?

Mrs. Cheveley: The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times.

Such comments are echoed in the words of other Wildean dandies. Mrs. Cheveley serves as spokeswoman on occasion for several Wildean ideas but Wilde insures that we see her as a villainess by making her a thief, a blackmailer, and a protégé of the evil Baron Arnheim. Moreover, her status as a dandy is further undercut by her conception of human relations as commercial transactions. The benevolent dandy must be above such sordidness.

A Wildean idea given especially strong emphasis in *An Ideal Husband* is that life is as capable of artistic form and meaning as a painting or a poem. The idea of life as an art form is not so explicitly presented as it is in *Intentions* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; but the emphasis on art, artists, artistic form, masks, poses, and such suggests the deep importance of this idea. Some characters are compared to works of art. Mrs. Cheveley is described as “a work of art . . . but showing the influence of too many schools”; Mabel Chiltern is really “like a Tanagra statuette”; Lord Caversham is “a fine Whig type. Rather like a portrait by Laurence.” Others are revealed as potential subjects. Watteau would have loved to paint Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, those “types of exquisite fragility.” Anthony Vandyke would have liked to paint Sir Robert Chiltern’s head. The opening scene takes place beneath a “large eighteenth century French tapestry—representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher—that is stretched on the staircase wall.” Sir Robert Chiltern is a collector of art objects and has a particularly fine collection of Corots. Each of these artists, especially Boucher and Watteau, throughout or at some stage of his career represents a commitment to artificiality, sensuousity, and escapism. Phipps, Lord Goring’s butler, is described as a “mask with a manner,” one who “represents the dominance of forms.” These details reinforce the Wildean precept that the artistic form of one’s life is all-important. This notion was central to the dandiacal creed.

The imagery of masks which so permeates this drama not only reinforces the life-as-art-form theme but buttresses the plot in several other ways. Events hinge upon reversals of conceptions of self and others. Lady Chiltern cannot conceive of committing a serious social error, nor can she imagine being married to a man of anything but impeccable character. Both conceptions prove faulty. Sir Robert presents a public mask of absolute personal integrity but has actually built his fortune and career upon a deception. Lady Chiltern condemns her husband at one point for not preserving his mask of integrity by lying to her. Sir Robert, at another point in the drama, refuses Lord Goring’s advice to confess because he believes his wife “does not know what weakness or temptation is.” Ironically, neither of the two principals can see beyond the mask of the other.

In this, the third of Wilde’s society comedies, the moralistic plot does not jar so sharply against the anti-Philistine and dandiacal elements. This harmony is achieved primarily by making Lord Goring the ally of the principal characters in their struggle against the wicked Mrs. Cheveley. The political satire also helps to dissipate the discord that existed in the earlier comedies between the comic themes and the serious ones. The plethora of rather hackneyed theatrical devices is evident as well as the insistence upon the melodramatic. More significant than all the above, however, is the substantial movement towards dramatic unity by the

uniting of the Wildean life-as-art-form, “mask,” “game,” and “pose” themes with his central dramatic action. Wildean dandyism can be clearly recognized as a fundamental aspect of Wilde’s thought and method and not a thematic excrescence. Imperfect as the blend may be, it illustrates Wilde’s substantial growth as a dramatist and presages the perfection of Wilde’s comedic form in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Source: Donald H. Ericksen, “The Drama,” in *Oscar Wilde*, Twayne Publishers, 1977, pp. 118–52.

An Ideal Husband: Compare and Contrast

- **1890s:** Dandies dress themselves in clothes reminiscent of days gone by; some carry a single flower as an accessory.

Today: A wide range of distinctive clothing that indicates a particular subculture, such as punk, Goth, and hip-hop, can be seen on the street of a typical American city.

- **1890s:** Conservative Victorian ideology still rules the day, despite a new generation’s sense that it is becoming “modern.”

Today: Alternative lifestyles and a general tolerance of difference coexists in the United States.

- **1890s:** Oscar Wilde’s career was destroyed thanks to allegations of same-sex love affairs.

Today: Same-sex marriage is legal in some countries, such as Canada; a debate over whether or not to institute state-sanctioned same-sex marriage is current in the United States.

- **1890s:** Queen Victoria, who gave the Victorian era its name, is known as the Imperial Queen; she declares herself Empress of India and Britain’s world empire becomes vast.

Today: The last of the British empire unravels in the mid twentieth century, and major British cities, such as London, are post-colonial, multiethnic metropolises.

An Ideal Husband: Topics for Further Study

- Research the circumstances surrounding Oscar Wilde’s trial and imprisonment.

- The two years Wilde spent in prison ruined his health. Late-nineteenth-century prison conditions were harsh and hard labor as a punishment was common. Research prisons and the treatment of prisoners in England from 1890, plotting the major prison reforms of the twentieth century.

- Research Wilde’s mother, Lady Jane Francesca Wilde, née Elgee. What works of literature did she publish under her own name? What did she publish under the pen name “Speranza,” and what was her role as a political writer in the cause of Irish independence?

- Research the major Irish uprisings against British rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Explore, for example, the Easter Uprising of 1916.

- Research the history of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Are they freedom fighters, or terrorists, in your view?

- Study one or two plays by the eighteenth-century- British playwright William Congreve, a master of the comedy of manners. Compare one of the plays to Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Wilde's father Sir William Wilde was an aural surgeon and oculist known throughout Europe for his expertise. What was the science of ears and eyes of the time? How successful were the operations of eye and ear surgeons then compared to today? Who were some of Sir William's most well-known patients?
- Wilde's mother was an active feminist, besides being an Irish patriot. Investigate her feminist activities and the activities of feminists of the time.

An Ideal Husband: Media Adaptations

- *An Ideal Husband* was made into a film by a British production in 1947. This film version was directed by Alexander Korda and starred Paulette Goddard as Mrs. Cheveley and Michael Wilding as Lord Goring.
- *An Ideal Husband* was adapted for television in Britain in 1969 as part of a "Play of the Month" series.
- Another British production made *An Ideal Husband* into a film 1998. This version was directed by William Cartledge and starred James Wilby as Sir Robert Chiltern, Sadie Frost as Mrs. Cheveley, and Jonathan Firth as Lord Goring.
- A joint United States and Great Britain production of *An Ideal Husband* was made in 1999. This widely acclaimed version was directed by Oliver Parker and featured an all-star cast, including Cate Blanchett as Lady Gertrude Chiltern, Minnie Driver as Mabel Chiltern, Julianne Moore as Mrs. Cheveley, Jeremy Northern as Sir Robert Chiltern, and Rupert Everett as Lord Goring.

An Ideal Husband: What Do I Read Next?

- The play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1896) is Wilde's comedic masterpiece; it premiered a month after *An Ideal Husband* in 1895.
- *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) is Wilde's much admired first book of fairy tales.
- *Translations* (1981) is a play by the well-known Irish playwright Brian Friel. It takes place in 1833, dramatizing Britain's project of mapping Ireland and, in the process, substituting English names for the original Gaelic ones.
- The conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873) by Walter Pater conveys the aestheticist creed that so impressed Wilde.
- Like Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Way of the World* (1700) by William Congreve is said to be one of the finest and funniest comedies of manners ever written in English.
- Literary scholar Terry Eagleton's forays into fiction include a play about Oscar Wilde, *Saint Oscar* (1989). This humorous, erudite play explores the nature of Wilde's art and place in British society.
- The Norwegian Henrik Ibsen's most famous "problem play," *A Doll's House* (1889), revolutionized European theater at the end of the nineteenth century. It set a new serious standard for playwrights, moving away from the fantastical entertainments of melodrama in favor of a new social realism in which social and

political problems of the day were addressed. *A Doll's House* takes on the issue of the “New Woman.”

- *Patience* (1881) is a comedic operetta about aesthetes and dandies by the famed Victorian musical theater duo W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

An Ideal Husband: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Holland, Vyvyan, *Oscar Wilde*, Thames and Hudson, 1960. This is a brief, informative book on the life of Wilde by his son, with photographs of Wilde, family, friends, and other notables. Holland corrects what he believes are inaccuracies in the major biographies of Wilde, such as those written by Frank Harris and Richard Ellmann.

Raby, Peter, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. This collection by several authors on different aspects of Wilde’s career and works contains many informative, recent essays. For example, one essay explores Wilde’s four comedic plays as a group, and another compares Wilde’s dramatic techniques to those of other major playwrights of the time.

Roditi, Edouard, *Oscar Wilde*, New Directions, 1986. Most recent books on Wilde by literary scholars tend to focus on narrow, specialized subjects. Roditi’s study, however, is a broad, general exploration of Wilde’s art. As such, it is very useful for students looking for a general introduction to Wilde.

San Juan, Epifanio, Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde*, Princeton University Press, 1967. Like Roditi’s study of Wilde, this scholarly exploration of Wilde is a comprehensive, useful introduction to Wilde’s work.