**Duplicity in Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband***

# Mrs. Cheveley

Mrs. Cheveley is the embodiment of duplicity. We only see her as a charming Englishwoman but soon learn her to be the villain of the plot who is willing to ruin Sir Robert’s career. Mrs. Cheveley is not what she appears to be at first and definitely not what she usually presents herself to be. Her serious, more dangerous villainess side only comes out a few instances in the play when she finds it utterly necessary. Apart from these, she likes to pose to be something entirely different. She poses as a silly, modern somewhat sexist English woman who is living aboard but in reality she is cunning, sly, powerful and ready to do whatever she must to get her way.

One of the attributes that differentiates Mrs. Cheveley from the rest of the characters in the play is that she is does not see duplicity as a fault. She believes that everyone is just posing and wearing a mask. To her, only posing is natural and so she does not feel there is anything wrong with her behavior and the masks she wears on a regular basis.

Mrs. Cheveley’s name itself is another way that her duplicity can be seen. It is not the name that Lady Chiltern knows her true nature by, it is another. This name is even what allows Mrs. Cheveley to enter their home without Lady Chiltern knowing it was really her. Much like this, Mrs. Cheveley moves about society without people really knowing her true nature as an immoral woman who is corrupt and blackmails Sir Robert and Lord Goring.

The brooch is also a symbol comparable to Mrs. Cheveley. It appears to be a red brooch but it can also be used as a bracelet just as Mrs. Cheveley appears to be a normal silly woman but is actually a dangerous and powerful enemy. The bracelet compliments her duality as it too is more than meets the eye. It is also in the form of a snake, which is a creature that in itself sheds its skin periodically which is like the masks Mrs. Cheveley wears. Ironically Mrs. Cheveley is later trapped by the bracelet. She also degrades to the form of snake as her mask is forced to be shed.

# Lord Goring

Lord Goring’s character in Ideal Husband is not the usual negative type of duplicity as shown in other characters (e.g. Mrs. Cheveley) but rather more of just a façade that he kind of puts up (the façade being that he is uncaring and useless in society though he really isn’t). In certain acts (especially Act 1) Wilde portrays him to be a man of great wit and comedy, one that goes against the normal Victorian views of society. For instance, he does not wish to be the ideal husband nor does he want a perfect wife. Although in the first act he seems to be irresponsible, uncaring, and “heartless,” (as Lord Caversham calls him), useless, and “the most idle man in London,” Goring is actually essential to the play and turns out to be quite useful to his friends Gertrude and Robert by turning out to be the hero.   
 Although Goring on the outside is shown to and “heartless” he is actually the one who both Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern confide in and look to for help throughout the play. For instance, in act 3 when he reads Lady Chiltern’s letter it states, “I need you. I trust you. I am coming to you.” He acts like morals are to be taken light-heartedly, but on the contrary, he really does know how to handle a problematic situation and can be very understanding/ useful. In comparison to Lady Chiltern, although his morals seem to be misplaced, at some point in the play he himself even rises above Lady Chiltern in his understanding of what an ideal marriage really should be – a realistic and accepting one.  
 Ultimately, the duplicity in Lord Goring’s character derives from the point that he seems to be this irresponsible, uncaring, and self-centered man but in reality he is the exact opposite: he is wise, humble, kind/pure-hearted and his morals are in the right place (he does not marry for perfection, but rather accepts Mabel for her imperfections just as she does the same).

# Sir Robert Chiltern

In Oscar Wilde’s play, *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern is forced to choose between committing to a dishonorable canal scheme in order to help the play’s villainess, Mrs. Cheveley gain a fortune, or having the tainted origin of his political power unveiled. Throughout the first half of the play, Sir Robert makes various duplicitous remarks that hint towards his corrupt past. However, as the play progresses, Sir Robert Chiltern is unmasked in front of his wife by Mrs. Cheveley, and begins to tell his wife the truth, in order to display the theme of duplicity in the play, as well as the evolution of Sir Robert.

Act 1:

* Sir Robert’s stage directions imply that his character conceals something throughout the first half of the play.
* “A nervous temperament, with a tired look…and chin contrast strikingly…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.” The “complete separation” in his personality foreshadows Sir Robert’s true nature, which is also double sided, due to the fact that he poses as an ideal husband, but in reality is a man tainted by the sins of his youth.
* After Mrs. Cheveley mentions Baron Arnheim, Sir Robert’s stage directions change to “with an almost imperceptible start,” “after a pause,” and “frowning.” Sir Robert’s behavior after hearing the Baron’s name displays a sense of discomfort, in order to hint at the link between Baron Arnheim and Robert’s past.
* Throughout the conversation between Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert about the letter from his past, his stage directions change once more to “biting his lip,” “hoarsely,” and “in a low voice.” Robert’s nervousness at the mention of these letters implies that they’re items that confirm that he did commit a dishonorable deed in his youth.
* Sir Robert lies to the paragon of purity, Lady Chiltern
* Robert’s curt responses to Lady Chiltern’s confrontation about the Suez Canal scheme display his efforts to attempt to hide his past from his wife. After Gertrude mentions that a person should be judged according to their past, Sir Robert mentions that “that is a hard saying, Gertrude,” “we all may make mistakes,” “one may be under certain obligations to people one must pay. Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise. Everyone does.” Robert makes these double sided remarks in order test Gertrude’s reaction to his corruption. These lines also capture the dramatic irony in the play. The reader knows of Sir Robert’s dishonorable secret from the past, which imbues the scene with a sense of irony because Robert is trying to defend himself from his wife’s high standards without her even knowing.
* Sir Robert equates himself to Mrs. Cheveley when he mentions “in a low voice ‘I will give you any sum of money you want.’” By wanting to buy back his past; Robert is using the source of his corruption, money, in order to save himself. This shows the contrast between Robert’s true persona and the ideal that he seems to portray.

Act 2:

* Sir Robert is straightforward and honest with Lord Goring, as opposed to his wife. This is because he feels that if he is honest with his wife, she, along with London society, will cast him into social oblivion.
  + Throughout the first section of the second act of the play, Sir Robert attempts to vindicate his reason for selling Lord Radley’s cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim. He mentions that “private information is practically the source of every large modern fortune,” “what this century worships is wealth. The god of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one must have wealth,” “passion for power,” “I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.” These statements are used in order to portray Robert’s ambitious nature. However, Robert adopts a different tone when speaking with his wife. He is much more humble and uses terms such as “dear.” Robert’s shift in tone not only changes the mood of the scene, but also allows him to maintain his façade of being the ideal husband. This façade is later broken when Mrs. Cheveley tells Gertrude the truth.
  + Quotes
    - “The truth has always stifled me.” This shows how Robert has had to live a life of secrecy because of his past. If he were to tell the truth, he would lose his wife’s love.

“I have some letters to write,” and “it is nothing dear, nothing.” These lines reinforce the idea of Sir Robert putting up a façade for Lady Chiltern. This is done in order to build up his character and strengthen the contrast between the two sides of Robert.

**After Act 2, Robert’s duplicity is no longer seen, as Mrs. Cheveley unmasks him in front of his wife. In reality, Sir Robert was only duplicitous with his wife. He was straightforward and honest with the other characters.**

## Other Characters

**Lady Chiltern:**

* Portrayed as the “ideal” wife
* In the beginning of Act I, Wilde describes her as a “woman of grave Greek beauty,” making her appear as some sort of Goddess
* Her standing at “the top of the staircase” puts her above all the other characters; it also shows how she holds people in high esteem, ignoring all their actual flaws (ex. Robert and his past)
* Throughout the play, she will criticize Mrs. Cheveley for her past ways (she describes her as being “untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence” as well as a “thief”)
* She tells Robert how “one’s past is what one is” (she was referring to Mrs. Cheveley, however she’ll later realize that this also reflects her own husband)
* She’ll tell Robert how men can “love what is beneath them – things unworthy, stained, dishonoured” (contradicts with herself because she finds out about Robert’s past, she herself has difficulty loving him all the same)
* After she says this, she’ll start to question if Robert has any “secret dishonor or disgrace” (she doesn’t want her husband to be one of those men that have done “shameful” things; contradicts with how she earlier said that one should “love what is beneath them”)
* She has this idea that her husband is pure and true, however she will later learn that one must love her partner no matter what they’ve done in the past

**Vicomte De Nanjac**

* He tries to fit into London society, but seems to mess up on the language
* Ex. “You butter me, as they say”

**Lady Basildon & Mrs. Marchmont**

* Wilde explains how their “affectation of manner has a delicate charm” (indicating that they act in a higher manner in order to receive attention)
* Complain on how their husbands never appreciate them, they actually have the “ideal” husband
* Throughout the play, their actions contradict what they say (ex. they get hungry and complain on how men are “horribly selfish” for never thinking about these things, yet when asked to go to supper, they’ll states how they “never take supper”)