
An Exploration of Different Conceptions of Love and Friendship in “An Ideal Husband”

Marinela Saraci (Terpollari)

University “Aleksander Moisiu”, Durrës, Albania
E-mail: marinelatrp@yahoo.com

Dr. Rregjina Gokaj

University “Aleksander Moisiu”, Durrës, Albania
E-mail: rregjinagokaj@gmail.com

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Abstract:

During 1890s, Wilde became a distinguished name with the publication of his successful play. He used lots of witty paradoxes and most of his characters entertain us with epigrams. Epigrams are what give his plays the “edge” which they are so famous for. His epigrams are a play on words by means of a clever rhetoric. He made use of literary devices like irony, paradox and hyperbole to get different meanings from a simple statement. Although *An Ideal Husband* adopts these motifs, it also parodies them through the play. Love and friendship were major themes for Society Drama during the 1890s. We will deal with all of these issues in the paper and these ideas will come out clearer.

Keywords: witty, epigrams, paradoxes, love, society drama.

Introduction

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish writer and poet. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Today he is remembered for his epigrams and plays, and the circumstances of his imprisonment which was followed by his early death. Despite the fact that Oscar Wilde has probably written about more than most 19th century writers, his place and reputation continue to be not very certain. His extraordinary personality and wit have dominated the imaginations of most biographers and critics.

Richard LeGallienne remarked in his opening statement of *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1909): “The writings of Oscar Wilde, brilliant and even beautiful as they are, are but the marginalia, so to say, of a striking fantastic personality.” For Wilde, style, not sincerity, was essential to the experience of art; “in sincerity” was merely a method or way by which we multiply our personalities- the idea of the mask is implied here. Most of the critics considered his play “The importance of being Earnest” as his most “insincere” and artificial play and Wilde was also criticized for imitating other authors (Woodcock, G. 1950. P.1); indeed he was accused of plagiarism- a more pejorative term for “imitation” (Beckson, K. 1974, p. 1). Wilde's response to such accusations was as follows: “Of course I plagiarize. It is the privilege of the appreciative man. One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make into something better or at least something different” (Max Beerbohm's *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed Rupert Hart -Davis London, 1964, p 36). From this point of view we can say that Wilde was perhaps much less than a mature poet, but a good critic, and an excellent playwright.

Wilde's achievement was just within the critical framework of a society who considered literature as a form of moral enlightenment in which sincerity was crucial. In theatre however Wilde's reputation rose as a result of well known critics such as William Archer and George Bernard Shaw. *Salome* and *De Profundis* in

fact hailed as masterpieces in Germany and France. His fame and success as poet was not as high as his reputation as a playwright and had steadily declined since the early part of this century. Most critics agree for sure on one thing, that Wilde's greatest literary achievement is *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and it has got a firm place among the greatest comedies of English drama. His life, writing and thought are full of writing contradictions and many critics have interpreted this as a lack of sincerity. We in fact believe that Wilde was a more *earnest* man than other people thought he could be and he was sincere in almost everything he did (Woodcock.G. 1950. P.4).The contradictions which become very obvious during his life and continue until he dies were the result of a very deep cleft his mental process. Two main currents of emotions and thoughts ran through his entire life and must give to his work the quality of that literary figure which was always present in his life—the Paradox. There are good possibilities that Wilde adored the paradox because it suited perfectly well the duality of his nature and attitude towards the world. This duality and double image was reflected in his work "*The picture of Dorian Gray*. Of course this idea of the split identity/personality is nothing new. It has been the basis for much legends and folk stories and is still present nowadays in popular novels and films. However no one has tried to analyze Wilde's work on this basis, his homosexual personality or his split of personality in this rational world. So it is widely accepted by critics that his cleft in the emotional and mental life is so visible, and its influence on his work and readers so strong. It would be impossible to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion or criticism of his work, if we did not take in consideration such inner division. Or he must be regarded as a superficial poseur—in which case the serious and profound content of his work is necessarily ignored or at best classified as insincere pastiche (Woodcock. G. 1950.P:3)

Oscar Wilde's play, "An Ideal Husband", which was first produced in 3 January 1895, represents the lurid depository of wealth that lies underneath the ever widening buttocks of the fat cats and bigwigs of London society. He started drafting An Ideal Husband in 1893, pretty distracted by his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. That romance and the scandal surrounding it landed Wilde in jail two years later – the same year his plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened in London. "The God of this century is wealth," says a character in the play. Wilde certainly had a resolute grip on his time. Much of what he wrote in 1895 still reverberates today. Wilde was a master at stretching the popular genre of his time, the "drawing room comedy." It features upper-class people in social and family situations. We also call this kind of play a "comedy of manners". It is a very able and entertaining piece of work, charmingly written. There are lots of scenes where the dialogue is overburden with witticisms and his peculiar twist of thought sometimes produces satisfactory results in the end (Beckson. K. 1974, p.174). There is a plain political agenda behind this play, but not within it. Performed at the Durham Studio Theater by students of the Theater, Dance and Performance Studies program, it was chosen with the current civic climate in mind. It asks about the role of the public and private in the life of an individual. "It is always worthwhile asking a question, though it is not always worthwhile answering one," says the nonsensically sensible character, Lord Goring

It is a play of parties thrown by politicians — these are, of course, political parties. The play is littered with the lace, satin and velvet of handmade dresses, crafted by many, worn by few. It is set in the craftily constructed sitting rooms and drawing rooms of the elite, alongside candles, teacups and bells that ring for servants. It bleeds witty truths. The play echoes with the ridiculous witticisms of rich wives. Midway through the play, Mason, the butler, walks up to the mantle of a fireplace and slides her finger along it, checking for dirt. With the swift flick of her hand, she brushes away any stray specks. She works for Sir Robert Chiltern, a public figure, a rising star in the House of Commons, and Mason must not allow the slightest bit of dirt to sit there in disobedience, to encamp upon his mantle, to occupy his home. It was clear for Oscar Wilde and it remains clear today: Dirt of any sort is neither pleasing nor proper near a public figure. According to G.B.Shaw he thinks that Wilde plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, dram, actors, readers, audience and with the whole theatre (Beckson.K.1974. P.174).

Such a trait scandalizes the Englishman, who can play no more with wit and philosophy than he can with a football or a cricket bat. He works on both, if he cannot make people laugh, of being the best cricketer and footballer in the world. is often called a "social comedy" because it has both a serious ("social") as well 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 nothing bad happens to the politician, 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. No one is totally perfect, pure and sincere. 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, and especially in moments when it has nothing to do with the social mores and etiquette. As the story unfolds, it's revealed that the man's thought to be perfect is flawed, the man with all the flaws must do something right, and the question remains: what makes *AN IDEAL HUSBAND*? Wilde's timeless and universal comedy explores morality and the greater standard that seems to fall upon those individuals in the public eye.

Act I also deals extensively with the role of women in society, Gagner argues that Wilde *must* be understood in relation to the audience and social institutions that 'affected the construction of both' the man and his texts. (Gagner. R. 1986). And the dialogue between Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley touches briefly on this topic. Sir Robert implies that the issue of the nature of women is a modern topic - he asks her if she thinks science can grapple with the problem of women. His question suggests that he sees women as very complex, but also acknowledges the increasing role women play within society, and the complex issues that arise from this. Mrs. Cheveley's words suggest a more traditional view of women; that women cannot be understood and should be viewed as aesthetic pieces of art. In fact, Wilde describes many of the female characters in this opening act as works of art. "Love" plays a prominent thematic role in this opening act and the remainder of the play. Love and what defines it in its purest and strongest form is clearly of great importance to the main theme of the play, marriage. Lady Markby arrives at the party and notes that people now marry as many times as possible because it is in fashion. When introducing Mrs. Cheveley to Sir Robert she comments that families are very mixed nowadays, and Lord Goring revels in his status as a bachelor. Lady Basilton and Mrs. Marchmont ironically sympathize with each other over their overly perfect husbands, which mocks the idea of a perfect marriage. Mrs. Cheveley states that in the London season, people are "either hunting from husbands, or hiding from them." Much of this act discusses the confusion and conflict inherent in marriage, while Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert represent an ideal marriage.

The conversation between Lady Chiltern and her husband address each other with earnestness, intimacy, and powerful emotion. Lady Chiltern states that her love for Sir Robert rests on his ideal morality, purity and honesty. When presented with his request for a moral compromise, Lady Chiltern refuses. She can only love him in his ideal and pure state. Later on, she will be confronted with her idealistic perspective, but in this act, it dominates and defines their marriage. Interestingly, the theme of politics is powerfully interwoven with that of love and marriage. In the play, choices regarding ethical political behavior relate directly to the triumph or failure of love.. These two forces of good and evil pull on Sir Robert Chiltern, forcing him to define himself and his life as either an ideal or morally imperfect husband.

This quote from the play is very significant about the importance of women in society and everyday life

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: 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: And women represent the irrational.

Mrs. Cheveley: Well-dressed women do.

Mrs. Cheveley moves to blackmail Sir Robert. As one of the primary themes of the play consists of competing visions of womanliness, it is of interest in that relating aestheticism with a certain conception of femininity.

As discussed in the Context, aestheticism, a doctrine often abbreviated as a philosophy of "art for art's sake," insists on art being judged by the beauty of artifice rather than that of morality or reason. Beauty is

irrational and amoral, and the aestheticist who worships beauty indulges in excess and exaggeration to flout his age's standards of respectability (i.e. "proper" thinking, proper aesthetic and moral judgments, etc.).

Typically one imagines the (male) dandy as the epitome of the aestheticist credo: artificial, amoral, and irrational. At the same time, like the dandy, these terms are often associated with the feminine. Here Mrs. Cheveley poses woman as a sort aestheticist art object (Danson, L.1991):. Like art, women can only be adored—that is, not analyzed—and herein lies their strength. As objects of admiration, women resist judgment according to rational or moral categories. They embody the irrational (or at least when well-dressed) and are thus powerful, perhaps even dangerous. Mrs. Cheveley herself is of course one of these dangerously well-dressed and irrational women.

If female strength lies in the irrational, one might note that Mrs. Cheveley's wit draws from the irrational as well. In this instance, irrationality inheres primarily in her use of hyperbole and false logic: if men can be analyzed, women can only be adored; science has no future in the world. Such irrational speech is what makes Mrs. Cheveley such a mighty conversational foe, poised to manipulate her interlocutors and misconstrue situations to her own advantage.

Thus, in conclusion, we must say that Wilde and his plays 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. His influence and greatness was well noted by most critics and readers. He is an easily recognizable writer, much famous for his quotes and his witty sayings.

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