An Ideal Husband Study Guide

An Ideal Husband by Oscar Wilde

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

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.

Author 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.

Plot 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 broach she lost the day before, asking whether it was found by anyone at the reception. (Lord Goring found the broach 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 broach and tells her that the broach 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.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

This play tells the story of two women, whose determination that their husbands should be perfect, creates complication in the lives of the men they love. The play veils important truths behind layers of tart wit and pointed humor, skillfully blending several different genres of comedy, including, satire and farce. Nevertheless, its themes are serious, relating to the lack of wisdom inherent in living according to limited perspectives.

The first scene is set in a large room in the home of Sir Robert Chiltern. His wife, Lady Chiltern, greets her guests, as they arrive for a party. Two women, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, gossip about other parties they attend, with Mrs. Marchmont saying her reason for coming to the Chiltern's parties is to be educated, since Lady Chiltern insists that she have some serious purpose in her life. After pointed conversation about how trivial other conversations at other parties are, and about how they suffer because of those conversations, the Vicomte joins the two women. We become unable to hear their conversation as our attention shifts to Lady Chiltern, telling Lord Caversham his son Lord Goring hasn't yet arrived. Mabel joins them, and they argue politely about how aimless Goring's life is, with Mabel flirtatiously hinting at her romantic interest in him.

A butler announces the arrival of Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Chiltern greets Lady Markby happily, but her manner changes when she greets Mrs. Cheveley, saying they've met before. As Lady Markby turns her attention to another guest, Mrs. Cheveley asks Lady Chiltern where they met, and Lady Chiltern reminds her they were at school together. Mrs. Cheveley says she's looking forward to meeting Lady Chiltern's husband, referring to how his reputation for cleverness has even reached her home in Vienna. Lady Chiltern coolly says she doubts there will be anything in common between her husband, and Mrs. Cheveley, and moves away.

Mrs. Cheveley moves into conversation with the Vicomte, as Sir Robert comes in and greets Lady Markby. Conversation reveals that Sir Robert is a politician, as is Lady Markby's husband, and that Lady Markby doesn't have a good opinion of the work that politicians in the House of Commons are doing. She then mentions that she's brought Mrs. Cheveley with her as her guest, referring to her having just arrived from Vienna and introducing her to Sir Robert. As Lady Markby moves away, conversation between Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert reveals that Mrs. Cheveley has been spoken about in London in the same way as Sir Robert has been spoken about in Vienna. Mrs. Cheveley has now remembered Lady Chiltern and recalls her always getting the good conduct prize at school.

After some witty talk about philosophy and the psychology of women, the conversation turns to politics, with Mrs. Cheveley saying that she likes talking about politics more than anything else. She believes that they're sometimes a game, and other times a

nuisance. Sir Robert then asks why she's in London, wondering whether she's there for the social season. Mrs. Cheveley says the season bores her, because it always seems to be about people looking for, or hiding from, their husbands. She says that she really came to London to meet Sir Robert and to ask him to do something for her. When he asks what it is, she tells him that she'll explain later. As she asks permission to walk through his house, she refers to a mutual acquaintance, Baron Arnheim. Sir Robert seems uncomfortable at the mention of his name, particularly when Mrs. Cheveley says she knew him intimately.

Goring comes in and greets Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley. Conversation reveals that she and Goring know each other, with Mrs. Cheveley asking whether Goring is still a bachelor. Goring confesses that he is. After some witty banter, Mrs. Cheveley goes off with Sir Robert, just as Mabel comes up to Goring. After arguing playfully about his lateness, Goring asks how Mrs. Cheveley came to be at the party, saying he hasn't seen her for years. Mabel explains that Lady Markby brought her, and then as they talk about Mrs. Cheveley's good and bad qualities, their conversation is interrupted by the Vicomte, who invites Mabel to go with him into the music room. She goes with him, reluctantly.

Lord Caversham comes up to Goring and berates him for his wasteful lifestyle. To get away from him, Goring enters into conversation with the returning Lady Basildon, who talks about how she loves going to political parties, but can't stand listening to politics being argued in the House of Commons. She wonders how politicians can stand the long speeches. Goring says they get through it by not listening, making a pointed comment about how listening might bring about a change of opinion and about how someone whose opinions can be changed is ultimately unreasonable. Lady Basildon says that that explains the relationships between man husbands and wives. Mrs. Marchmont, who has just joined the conversation, agrees.

Goring jokes that their views are those of women with "the most admirable husbands in London," leading both women to comment that their husbands are faultless, well trained, perfect ... and boring. They also talk about how tragic it is that they're trusted so thoroughly by their husbands. Goring makes a joke, leading the women to complain that he's on the side of the men. He refers to how he, like the other men, was talking to Mrs. Cheveley, who they say made unpleasant comments about London society. Mabel joins them, complaining about how everyone is talking about Mrs. Cheveley. After more banter about how unhappy Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are with their perfect husbands, Mabel leads Goring away to get some supper, saying she wishes he was paying more attention to her. As they go, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont complain about how men in general, and their husbands in particular, pay no attention to them. Men invite them both into supper; both refuse flirtatiously and then to go in, just as Sir Robert is returning with Mrs. Cheveley.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

There are three key components to this play, all of which are introduced in this first section. These include a carefully developed, if somewhat melodramatic plot, satirical humor, and intriguing characterizations.

In terms of the plot, its central elements are foreshadowed, rather than developed in this section. These elements include the previous relationships between Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, and between Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring. Both relationships become important motivations for the actions of all three characters later in the play. Another important piece of foreshadowing is Mrs. Cheveley's comment to Sir Robert that she has a favor to ask him, a comment that sets up their confrontation in the next section of the act and their conflict throughout the play. Still another piece of foreshadowing occurs in Mrs. Cheveley's reference to Baron Arnheim and Sir Robert's resulting unease, with the Baron's past involvement with them both playing a key role in the plot. The final important foreshadowing of the main plot occurs in Mrs. Cheveley's comment about Lady Chiltern receiving the prize for good behavior at school. This offers a telling glimpse into a particular aspect of Lady Chiltern's character, her insistence upon high standards of behavior. This also plays an essential role in motivating later action.

The central elements of the play's sub-plot, involving the developing relationship between Mabel and Goring, are also introduced here. In general, a sub-plot serves to illuminate the main plot either by imitation or contrast. In *An Ideal Husband*, the Mabel/Goring subplot functions on both levels, illuminating the main Sir Robert/Lady Chiltern/ Mrs. Cheveley plot through imitation, but playing out its conflicts in a contrasting, light hearted way. Specifically, Mabel's standards of behavior that she expects from Goring, echo the standards Lady Chiltern sets for Sir Robert. However, because Mabel has less to lose than Lady Chiltern if those standards aren't met, the conflict between her and Goring can be played for laughs instead of thematically relevant intensity. These parallel sets of standards, and the way Sir Robert and Goring fail to live up to them, form the central issues in both the main and sub-plots.

Lady Chiltern's and Mabel's expectations that their standards be met are echoed in the comments made by Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont, characters who are clearly defined examples of the play's sense of satire. This is a style of humor in which characters, points of view or belief systems are exaggerated, in order to illustrate how foolish they are. To be specific, Lady Basildon's and Mrs. Marchmont's exaggeratedly tortured comments about their perfect husbands satirize the narrowness and short sightedness of similar attitudes held by other women, particularly Lady Chiltern, who obsessively sees her husband as perfect. Other objects of satire include the sense of self importance shared by many politicians. This is illustrated in the comments of Lady Markby, and most importantly the superficial attitudes and ways of high society. These are demonstrated by the comments of Lord Caversham and the attitudes of Lady Markby and other characters, many of whom are drawn with the aforementioned vivid, but broad strokes.

One of the traditional hallmarks of satire is that the characters in plays built around that kind of humor are relatively two dimensional, embodying certain characteristics necessary to define the play's satirical point, as opposed to being fully rounded individuals. Characters of this sort in *An Ideal Husband* include Lady Markby, who embodies frivolous social behavior, Mrs. Cheveley, who embodies ruthless greed, and Lord Caversham, who embodies the distaste and lack of understanding with which the old often view the young. Mabel is also this sort of character, embodying the shallow desires of young women, who just want to have a good husband. Lady Chiltern, who embodies the thematically important characteristic of having limited perceptions and beliefs about her husband, joins her.

Goring and Sir Robert are the exceptions to this principle, as both appear to be one thing and are later revealed to have more depth to them than anyone. This dramatizes a key aspect of the play's theme relating to the dangers of having limited expectations and understandings of others, as does the previously discussed idea that serious truths are veiled beneath layers of wit and humor. In short, the play makes its thematic point about the dangers of narrow beliefs through its characters, as well as its story, illustrating how perception and intention are rarely the pure truths we would like them to be.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Mrs. Cheveley tells Sir Robert that she wants to talk to him about a "political and financial scheme" involving a canal construction company in Argentina, referring to his previous interest in a similar scheme involving the Suez Canal, several years before. Sir Robert says that the Suez program had overall importance for the empire, but the Argentine scheme is nothing more than a stock swindle. He explains that he set up a private commission to inquire into it. The commission has revealed that the money already invested in it has disappeared, and practically no work has been done. He hopes that Mrs. Cheveley hasn't put her money into it. Mrs. Cheveley tells him that she's done exactly that on the advice of Baron Arnheim, and refers to the Baron's interest in the project as his second last romance. We, and perhaps Sir Robert, understand her to mean that she and the Baron had an affair. Sir Robert offers to show her some of his paintings, but Mrs. Cheveley insists that he stay and talk business with her.

Sir Robert stays, saying he plans to present the commission's report in the House of Commons the next day. Mrs. Cheveley tells him that she wants him to withhold it and say instead say that the Argentine project is a good, sound investment. He says she can't be serious. She offers to pay him handsomely, and he angrily reminds her she's talking to an English gentleman. She says that she's actually talking to someone who began his financial and political career by selling a Cabinet secret to a stock exchange speculator. She informs him that she has a letter proving her claim, written by Sir Robert to Baron Arnheim, telling him to buy shares in the Suez Canal three days before the Government bought its shares. She says that in exchange for saying what she wants about the Argentine canal, she'll give Sir Robert the letter back. She then has a long speech about how society in England demands that everyone behave morally, referring to the numbers of politicians whose careers have ended, when it's been revealed they haven't behaved well enough. She details how Sir Robert's political career won't survive a scandal like the one she proposes to reveal. Sooner or later, everyone has to pay for what they do. Now, he has to pay. She says that he has to promise to do as she asks that night.

Sir Robert says it's impossible, but Mrs. Cheveley tells him that he must make it possible, threatening to go to the newspapers. Sir Robert then offers her any sum of money she wants, but she says no man is rich enough to buy back his past. He asks whether she truly means to give back the letter, and she says she promises to deal fairly with him, adding that dealing fairly was one of the things Baron Arnheim taught her. Sir Robert asks for more time, but she says she has to telegraph his decision to Vienna that night and starts to go. Sir Robert says he'll do as she asks. Mrs. Cheveley thanks him, saying she knew and understood his nature and was never in any doubt that he'd agree. She then asks him to call for her carriage, and he goes out.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

The tone of the play shifts significantly in this section, as the pointedly comic satire of the first section gives way to high stakes confrontation. In itself, the shift is another example of how the very nature of the play makes its thematic point - in the same way as Sir Robert is surprised out of his complacency, and Lady Chiltern is eventually surprised out of her limited perceptions of who her husband is, we are surprised by the play's sudden change in feel. It could be argued that such a drastic shift is jarring and inappropriate, that the comedy of the first section is at odds with the relatively intense drama of the second. In the context of the play as a whole, however, and in consideration of other perceptions that are eventually challenged, specifically our perceptions of the relative shallowness of Goring, it would seem that the layers of meaning revealed by the shift between satire and drama are more than thematically relevant - they are thematically essential.

Aside from again illustrating the play's theme, the main purpose of this scene is to activate the main plot. Mrs. Cheveley's insistence that Sir Robert act according to her wishes sets in motion a chain of events that defines the action for the rest of the play, creating conflicts that resound through the lives and relationships of all the central characters, principally Sir Robert, Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Lady Chiltern returns, accompanied by several of her guests, who are saying their farewells. First to leave is Lady Markby, who talks about being too old to set a good moral standard. However, she cites how wonderful Lady Chiltern is for doing so. As she goes out on the arm of Lord Caversham, Mrs. Cheveley compliments Lady Chiltern on her charming home and husband, explaining that she wanted to interest him in the Argentine Canal plan. She says that he'll be speaking in support of it in the House of Commons the following day. Lady Chiltern says that she must be mistaken, saying he'd never support that project, but Mrs. Cheveley insists that he is. Sir Robert then returns, announcing that Mrs. Cheveley's carriage is ready to take her home. As he escorts her out, Lady Chiltern watches them go, troubled.

Mabel refers to Mrs. Cheveley as "horrid." Goring tells that her it's time to go to bed, but she says it's too early and invites him to talk with her. As she sits, she discovers a diamond brooch someone has dropped. Goring looks at it, says it can also be worn as a bracelet, puts it in his pocket, and then says he's going to make a request. Mabel says that she's been waiting all evening for him to do so, but when he merely asks her to keep the discovery of the bracelet a secret, she seems disappointed. Goring explains that he gave the brooch to someone several years ago. Mabel takes offense and says goodnight to him, also saying goodnight to Lady Chiltern as she leaves.

Lady Chiltern and Goring briefly discuss Mrs. Cheveley, with Lady Chiltern telling him what Mrs. Cheveley told her about her plans to involve Sir Robert in the Argentine plan. As they talk about how mistaken Mrs. Cheveley is for thinking she can influence him, Sir Robert comes back, inviting Goring to stay a while longer. Goring politely refuses, saying he's got further plans. After he goes, Lady Chiltern confronts Sir Robert with what she was told by Mrs. Cheveley, talking about how, when they were at school together, she was a liar and thief. Sir Robert urges her to give Mrs. Cheveley a chance, saying that what happened was many years ago, and that people change. Lady Chiltern says that what happened in a person's past is the only thing by which their lives can be judged.

Lady Chiltern goes on to ask why Mrs. Cheveley boasted that she'd won his support for the Argentine plan. Sir Robert says his first opinion was mistaken, that the Commission he set up was misinformed, and that he has simply changed his mind. Lady Chiltern asks whether he's being completely honest. Sir Robert evades the question, and Lady Chiltern asks why he's being evasive. Sir Robert says that part of political life is making compromises. They argue, at length, about whether Sir Robert is betraying his principles. Lady Chiltern insists that Sir Robert is unlike other men. She says that because of his integrity, he's been an ideal to her. That's why she loves him. She begs him to not change his mind, saying that if he did, he'd kill her love for him. She admits that she knows there are men who've done shameful things in their pasts and have had

to pay for it by committing another shameful act. She asks if he's that kind of man. She says that she has to know, and if that's the case, they'll have to live apart.

Sir Robert assures Lady Chiltern that he has no secret in his past. Lady Chiltern insists that he write Mrs. Cheveley and tell her he won't support her scheme. He suggests that he should see her personally, but Lady Chiltern tells her he must never see her again and write the letter now. He does, and Lady Chiltern arranges for it to be delivered to Mrs. Cheveley's hotel. She then tells Sir Robert that she instinctively feels that she's saved him from something dangerous and dishonorable. She says that he's brought into their home and their lives a nobler atmosphere and finer ideals. He asks her to love him always, and she says she will. She adds that he will always be worthy of love, because "the highest" are always worthy of it. She kisses him and goes out. Sir Robert paces, orders the lights to be put out, and then sits alone in the dark.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

The central conflict in this play, built around the discrepancy between the truth about Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern's beliefs about him, is dramatized in several ways in this section. This happens not only through their extended confrontation, which is the climax of the act, but also through Lady Markby's reference to Lady Chiltern's moral character and Sir Robert's reference to people having changed. This is actually a plea for Lady Chiltern to be tolerant of him, not Mrs. Cheveley.

What heightens this conflict is the apparently absolute rigidity with which Lady Chiltern states her views, perspectives and needs. This is the clearest example yet of how a character is painted in vivid, but very broad, strokes to make a satiric, dramatic and/or thematic point. In this case, it relates to the dangers associated with having limited expectations and strict definitions of how people should behave. We see clearly how there is room for only one Sir Robert in Lady Chiltern's life - the upright, moral, steadfast man of integrity. It's more than likely that he's aware of how she feels, an aspect of his position that adds another layer of meaning to his earlier desperation to get Mrs. Cheveley to change her plan. At the same time, it's ironic that he allows himself to be dominated by his wife's insistence in the same way as he was governed by Mrs. Cheveley's. It's not stretching the point too far, in fact, to say that Lady Chiltern blackmails him with divorce, in the same way as Mrs. Cheveley blackmails him with exposure.

This raises the question of whether Sir Robert is truly the man of integrity his wife thinks he is, or whether he is weak at his core. The answer to this question appears at the beginning of the following act, in which Sir Robert refers to his deep need and love for his wife as the reason behind his submission to both Mrs. Cheveley and Lady Chiltern. This is the second instance in which the development of his character follows and dramatizes the development of the play's theme relating to the difference between reality and expectation. We don't necessarily expect Sir Robert to love his wife as intensely as he clearly does, in the same way as we didn't expect him to have been involved in a stock irregularity. But the revelation of that love is still to come. For now, at

the end of this act, we see how Sir Robert is trapped, his position as "ideal husband" of the play's admittedly ironic title leaving him dangerously vulnerable to the desires of two equally single-minded women. The act's final image, of Sir Robert alone in the dark, is an effective visual metaphor for his emotional and spiritual state.

The brief interlude between Mabel and Goring functions on two levels. It moves the subplot involving their relationship slightly forward, with Mabel's disappointment at the nature of Goring's request being easily interpreted as frustration that he isn't in fact proposing marriage. At the same time, the introduction of the brooch/bracelet and Goring's comment that he presented it to someone several years ago foreshadows the role it plays in resolving the conflict between Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley. It possesses metaphoric value, as a symbol of the power of the past to affect, control, and ultimately enchain the present.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

The following morning, Sir Robert talks with Goring. Conversation reveals that Sir Robert has revealed everything. Goring believes that Sir Robert should have told Lady Chiltern the truth. Sir Robert believes that he could never have told her, out of fear of losing the only woman who ever awakened feelings of love in him. Goring offers to talk with her, but Sir Robert tells him that it would be useless, talking about himself and his past with bitterness and asking who was hurt by what he did. Goring suggests that he hurt himself, but Sir Robert doesn't respond. He instead asks whether Goring thinks it's fair that someone's entire career should be ruined by a youthful mistake.

When Goring says that life itself isn't fair, Sir Robert talks about how each century has its own definitions of success. This century (the 20th) measures success by wealth, and when he was young, he couldn't wait for that success. He explains about how he was inspired by a philosophy espoused by Baron Arnheim, that power and success could be achieved by scientifically and objectively pursuing wealth. Goring describes that philosophy as shallow.

However, Sir Robert says that, because Goring has never known poverty, he will never understand the opportunity that the Baron gave him when he explained that philosophy. He then talks about the stock swindle, explaining that when certain cabinet documents passed through his hands, he saw an opportunity for the kind of power and success the Baron referred to and took it. Goring wonders how he could have been so weak as to yield to such temptation. Sir Robert says passionately that he wasn't weak at all. What he did was actually an act of "horrible, terrible courage," gambling his entire future on one chance. He says that as a result of winning that gamble, he found the confidence to enter politics right away, invested well, and gained both power and great wealth. Instead of feeling remorse for what he did, he feels pride at having fought the century with its own weapons, and winning.

After a long silence, Sir Robert asks Goring whether he despises him. When Goring says that he feels sad and sorry for him, Sir Robert admits that he did feel remorse. He explains that the initial sum he received from the Baron in exchange for the stock information has been given to charity several times over. Goring vows to help him in any way he can, going on to say that a public confession would ruin him but that he must tell Lady Chiltern everything. Sir Robert refuses to do so, saying that it would destroy her love for him. He instead asks what he can do about Mrs. Cheveley. When he asks if Goring knows her well, Goring admits that they were once engaged. He avoids the question of why they separated, and suggests that she be offered money, saying that she used to be very fond of it. Sir Robert says she refused money, adding that he feels and fears that public disgrace is inevitable. Goring insists that Sir Robert continue to fight, but admits he doesn't know how.

Sir Robert asks whether he's justified in using any weapon he can, saying he's wondering whether he should get in touch with the embassy in Vienna to find out whether there's any scandal associated with Mrs. Cheveley that he could use against her. Goring says it's worth a try, even though it seems very possible that Mrs. Cheveley is the sort of woman who enjoys being part of a scandal. Sir Robert prepares a cable and arranges for it to be sent to Vienna. He promises to let Goring know as soon as he hears anything, and then comments that he feels like a man on a sinking ship.

Lady Chiltern comes in, greets Goring, and says she's come from a meeting at which Sir Robert's name was cheered. She invites Goring to tea, and starts to put away her hat. Goring teases her about having her hat discussed at the meeting, but she says she and her friends only discuss serious things that he would find "thoroughly uninteresting." After she's gone, Sir Robert thanks Goring for being a good friend, saying he's helped him find the courage to tell the truth. Goring jokes about how he considers telling the truth a bad habit. He tells Sir Robert that if he needs to get hold of him, he can send a note around to his club. Lady Chiltern comes back in, just as Sir Robert is leaving. When he says he's got some letters to write, she tells him he works too hard and that he never seems to think of himself. Sir Robert goes, repeating that he's all right.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The plot is both advanced and explained in this scene. It's advanced by Sir Robert's plan to find out if there is any scandal associated with Mrs. Cheveley, and explained by his lengthy speeches about how and why he got involved in the stock swindle. His remarks about courage in the context of staking one's entire future on a single, risky move tell us something about his character. As a result, this foreshadows his actions later in the play, when he makes similar gambles in his attempts to free himself from Mrs. Cheveley's control and to prove his worth to Lady Chiltern. Meanwhile, the reference to the previous engagement between Goring and Mrs. Cheveley foreshadows later developments in the plot, specifically the way Mrs. Cheveley tries to win control over Goring through their shared history.

The play's sense of wit and satirical humor becomes somewhat muted in this scene, as again the tone turns serious through Sir Robert's anguished storytelling. There are moments at which Goring is his usually witty self, but these are relatively few. Instead, he somewhat surprisingly comes across as sensible, thoughtful and even wise, the first point in the play at which he's revealed to have that side to him, but certainly not the last. This is another example of the way in which the play's character development makes its thematic point about the narrowness of perspectives. Goring appears to be concerned with being witty and with superficial things, like hats. We, and perhaps even the other characters, might expect him to behave no differently. When his wisdom appears, as it does in this scene, as well as in later scenes in the play, it comes as a surprise and bears out the play's thematic point.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Lady Chiltern tells Goring that she's glad he came by. He guesses that she wants to talk about Mrs. Cheveley, and she tells him he's right. She tells him how she convinced Sir Robert to write Mrs. Cheveley and withdraw his promise to speak in favor of the Argentine Scheme in the House of Commons. She says that Sir Robert is not like other men and must continue to be above reproach. When Goring is silent, she asks whether he agrees and urges him to speak with her frankly. He begins by speaking about real life, which Lady Chiltern teasingly says he has no real experience of. He tells her he has observed a great deal. He talks about how there's always something a little unscrupulous about ambition and success, and tactfully suggests Lady Chiltern is perhaps a little judgmental in her views. He tells her that nobody is incapable of acting foolishly, and that life can't be understood or truly lived without charity towards the failings of others. He says that if Lady Chiltern is ever in trouble, she can trust him absolutely and come to him at once. He will help her in any way he can. Lady Chiltern comments with surprise on how seriously Goring is talking, and Goring makes a joke about how it will never happen again.

As Lady Chiltern says she likes it when Goring is serious, Mabel comes in, saying seriousness is unbecoming to him. She and Goring greet each other, and Goring says that he's just about to leave. They banter about his bad manners and make plans to go riding together. Just before he goes, Goring asks Lady Chiltern for a list of her guests at the party the previous evening. Lady Chiltern tells him how he can get a hold of a list. He and Mabel tease each other some more, and then Goring goes out.

Mabel speaks at length to Lady Chiltern about how a man named Tommy Trafford proposes marriage to her far too frequently and in ways that are far too unsuitable. She asks Lady Chiltern to speak with him. Lady Chiltern reminds her that Trafford is a good man with a lot of prospects, but Mabel talks about how men with prospects pay more attention to their careers than they do to the women in their lives. She prepares to go out, but just then, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley arrive. The women make small talk about dresses, charity work, and the dangers of being too modern, which Lady Markby says leads to being out of fashion far too quickly. She tells Mabel that the only fashion women need to be concerned with is being pretty. Mabel thanks her for her advice and goes out.

Lady Markby tells Lady Chiltern that the only reason she and Mrs. Cheveley came was to learn whether Mrs. Cheveley's brooch had been found. As Lady Chiltern asks a Servant, Lady Markby chatters about how frequently one is jostled at society events like parties and the opera. Therefore, it's so easy to lose things. The Servant says that no brooch has been found, and Lady Chiltern tells him to bring tea.

Lady Markby chatters about how awful it is to lose things, how her husband hasn't given her any gifts in the years he's been involved in politics, and how politics has ruined more marriages than the Higher Education for Women movement. She and the other women talk about how it's men who need higher education. Lady Markby laments how her husband needs to be taught that the home is not the place for talking politics. Lady Chiltern says she loves to hear Sir Robert talk politics. As the servants bring in tea, Lady Markby prepares to leave, saying she needs to visit a friend who has been traumatized by the prospect of her daughter marrying an inappropriate husband, and by the quarrel between her eldest son and her husband. Mrs. Cheveley says that fathers have much to learn from their sons, particularly about the art of living. After chattering about yet another friend, Lady Markby starts out the door. Mrs. Cheveley prepares to go with her, but Lady Chiltern asks her to stay, saying she'd like to talk with her.

After Lady Markby goes out, Mrs. Cheveley comments that she's a much better speaker than her husband. Lady Chiltern abruptly tells her that if she'd known who Mrs. Cheveley was, she wouldn't have been invited to the party. Mrs. Cheveley comments on how Lady Chiltern hasn't changed at all since their days at school. Lady Chiltern suggests that people rarely change, stating her belief that when someone is dishonest once, they will be dishonest again. Mrs. Cheveley says that she's sorry for her, going on to tell Lady Chiltern that she didn't come about the brooch at all. She came to tell her to convince Sir Robert to keep his original promise to speak in favor of the Argentine scheme, saying she has Sir Robert "in the hollow of [her] hand," and calling him fraudulent and dishonest.

Sir Robert appears, unnoticed by Lady Chiltern, as she orders Mrs. Cheveley out of the house. Mrs. Cheveley sees him and tells Lady Chiltern to ask how he gained his fortune, and whether it's true he sold a cabinet secret to a stockbroker. Sir Robert orders Mrs. Cheveley to leave, and Mrs. Cheveley says that if what she asks isn't done, she will publicize Sir Robert's crime.

Sir Robert tries to explain, but Lady Chiltern refuses to listen, saying he's been wearing a horrible mask and accusing him of lying to the world. She refers to memories of words he spoke and things he did that made her love him. She believed him to be noble and honest. As a result, she believed that the world was a better place. Sir Robert says her pain is the result of her mistake, and that she placed him on a pedestal without taking into account his faults, follies, weaknesses or imperfections. He talks about how the imperfect need more love than the perfect. Love should forgive, or it's no use, otherwise. He says women think they idolize men when, in fact, they make them into false idols.

Sir Robert says that h e was afraid to confess his past, out of fear that he would lose her love. He further accuses that when she insisted he go back on his promise to Mrs. Cheveley, he ruined his life. He says that Mrs. Cheveley offered him security in burying his mistake. He could have lived his life in peace. He adds that, because Lady Chiltern did what she did, all that's left for him is mockery, shame and dishonor. He cries out for women to no longer put men on pedestals, saying that it ruins men's lives in the way

that she has ruined his. He goes out. Lady Chiltern tries to follow him, but he closes the door in her face. She bursts into tears.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

The play's theme about the lack of wisdom of having limited perspectives plays out on several levels in this scene. On a satiric and somewhat more superficial level, Mabel's complaints about being proposed to inappropriately comment comically on the importance that people, especially young women, place on the way love is offered, and on the trappings of marriage, rather than on the truth of love and the motivations behind marriage. In other words, her attitude points out the foolishness of her limited perspective that focuses on style, rather than substance. On another level, the surprise inherent in the discovery that one's perspectives are limited can be found in two situations, both involving Lady Chiltern. She gets a pleasant surprise, when she discovers the seriousness and wisdom living beneath Goring's mask of superficial wit and triviality, or the substance beneath his style. She also receives a deeply unpleasant surprise when confronted by Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert with the truth about his past. It's in this last confrontation that the play makes its thematic point most seriously.

The cries of despair from both Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert clearly and vividly define both the personal and professional consequences of holding too tightly to narrow, unrealistic perspectives.

In the wake of Lady Chiltern's explosion of pain, Sir Robert's speech at the end of the scene is also an explosion, but of pain mixed with anger and desperation. It's at this point that the play again makes its thematic point by revealing previously unsuspected depths to a character that, to this point, had been relatively two-dimensional. In the same way as wisdom has emerged unexpectedly from the apparently trivial Lord Goring, passion surges unexpectedly from the apparently reticent and stiff-upper-lipped, Sir Robert. We've seen glimpses of this passion before, specifically in his conversation with Goring at the beginning of this act. However, up to this point in the play, we've had no idea of both his personal passion for his wife and his more generally directed passion for freedom from the expectations she places upon him. In short, Sir Robert's speech is not just a plea for compassion for himself or for men in general, but for human beings to be compassionate with each other. This is an interesting point to consider given that Oscar Wilde, the author of the speech, was imprisoned after a sham trial for having homosexual tendencies at a time when love between men was regarded as one of the most disgusting sins against humanity and nature.

There are elements of foreshadowing in this scene, including, Goring's invitation to Lady Chiltern to call on him if she's ever in trouble, which foreshadows the moment later in the action when she does exactly that, and also his request to see her guest list, which foreshadows developments in his relationship with Mrs. Cheveley. Those developments are also foreshadowed in the reference to the brooch, which as previously discussed, also plays an important role in the resolution of the plot involving Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert.

Throughout this scene, and throughout the play, interesting points are dealt with glancingly, in witty cleverness that makes a pointed observation and quickly moves on. In this scene, such points include Lady Markby's observations about fashion, an indirect comment on how women like Mrs. Cheveley and Lady Chiltern create trouble for themselves by trying to be more than just pretty. Another point, also made by Lady Markby, refers to politics ruining marriages, which is particularly interesting since the marriage of the Chiltern's is in the process of being ruined by political concerns. Yet another of Lady Markby's comments, about the difficulties associated with women marrying the wrong sort of husband, also echoes the Chilterns' situation, in that Sir Robert is revealed to be the wrong sort of, imperfect man for Lady Chiltern. All these points suggest another manifestation of the play's theme - that Lady Markby, in spite of her apparent talkativeness and silliness is, in her way, as wise as Lord Goring. In short, our perceptions of her are, on some level, as they were about him.

Finally, Mrs. Cheveley's passing remark about fathers needing to learn about how to live from their sons is a reference to Caversham, who clearly has things to learn about life and wisdom from his wiser than expected son, Lord Goring.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

This scene is set in the library of Lord Goring's home. Goring prepares to go out for the evening, making witty comments to his impassive valet about the nature of fashion and society, as he struggles to decide which flower to wear in his buttonhole. He tells the valet to call him a taxi and looks at his mail. He notices a letter from Lady Chiltern, opens it, and reads it - "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." Goring understands this to mean that she has been told everything. He decides that the thing to do is to convince her to stand by her husband. He tells his valet, who has just come back in, that he is not receiving any visitors, except Lady Chiltern. The valet tells him that Caversham has arrived. After complaining to himself about how inconvenient the arrival of parents always is, he happily greets Caversham.

Caversham says that he wants to have a serious conversation. Goring jokes that it's neither the right time nor the right place for such conversation, but Caversham tells him that he's going to have one anyway and starts talking about how it's Goring's duty to get married. He refers to Sir Robert, saying he's come a long way because of his "sensible marriage to a good woman" and urges Goring to follow his example. Goring promises to visit him the next day to continue the conversation and offers to see him out, but Caversham insists upon staying. Goring shows him into the smoking room, and then tells the valet he's expecting a woman to visit, that she's to be shown into the drawing room, and that nobody else is to be allowed in. As the front doorbell rings, Caversham comes back in, impatiently demanding that Goring join him.

Goring and Caversham go out just as another servant shows in Mrs. Cheveley, who seems surprised when the valet says Goring is expecting her. She talks about how unattractive the room is, saying she'll have to redecorate it and telling the valet to light some candles. When he goes out to fetch them, Mrs. Cheveley wonders to herself which woman Goring is really expecting. She looks around, discovers Lady Chiltern's letter, and recognizes the handwriting on the envelope, referring to "the ten commandments in every stroke of the pen." She reads the letter and smiles in triumph. She's just about to put it in her pocket, when the valet returns with the candles and shows her into the drawing room. The valet goes out again. Mrs. Cheveley comes back in and almost has her hands on Lady Chiltern's letter, when she hears Goring and Caversham coming from the smoking room. She has to run back into the drawing room.

Goring and Caversham come in, arguing over whether Goring has the right to choose whom he marries. Goring says that one enters into marriage out of love, and Caversham saying one gets married out of common sense, adding that common sense is one of the things that goes along with being a man. Goring shows him out, and returns with Sir Robert, who had been told that Goring was out. Goring tells him that he's very busy and asked to not be disturbed. Sir Robert says that he needs a friend, explaining that Mrs. Cheveley told Lady Chiltern everything. He talks about how

miserable he is, and reveals that he got a wire back from Vienna saying Mrs. Cheveley is well thought of there. He doesn't know what to do. Goring rings for drinks, and when the valet comes in, he instructs him to tell the expected lady that he's had to go out. The valet tells him that the lady is in the drawing room, as ordered. We understand at this point that Goring mistakenly thinks that Lady Chiltern is in the drawing room, not Mrs. Cheveley.

Goring wonders what to do as the valet goes out, and Sir Robert asks again for advice. He talks about how much he still loves his wife, about how great a distance now lies between them, and how brutal he was to her. Goring assures him that Lady Chiltern will forgive him, because she loves him. Sir Robert fervently hopes that she will, but he adds that there's something else he has to say. At that moment, the valet returns with drinks. Goring tells him that Sir Robert will take the cab he ordered.

Sir Robert asks to stay a few more minutes, saying he needs time to collect himself before going to speak in the House of Commons on the Argentine Canal question. A noise is heard from the drawing room. Sir Robert hears it, but Goring pretends he didn't. Sir Robert asks what's going on, and Goring says nothing. Sir Robert insists on going in to see who's there, Goring tries to stop him, but Sir Robert goes in. He comes right back out and asks what "that woman" is doing there. Goring, under the impression that the woman is Lady Chiltern, tries to assure Sir Robert that she's innocent of any wrongdoing. Sir Robert reacts furiously, saying that Goring and the woman are well suited to each other, false friends and treacherous. Goring protests, but Sir Robert storms out, calling him a liar. After he's gone, Mrs. Cheveley comes out, looking very pleased with herself.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

This act marks a shift in the comic energy of the play from satire into farce, a genre of comedy in which characters act in desperate ways, in order to conceal desperately important truths in the face of increasingly challenging obstacles. The key component in this aspect of farce is the way that, throughout this section and for the remainder of the act, Goring acts with increasingly comic desperation to keep Lady Chiltern's visit a secret in the face of his father's visit and Sir Robert's need for help. Another traditional aspect of farce is the way that misunderstandings trigger more misunderstandings. The key example of this is the way Goring's misunderstanding of the valet triggers Sir Robert's misunderstanding of Goring, which triggers his misunderstanding of Sir Robert, which triggers the breach in friendship that has an important effect on the action in Act 4.

On a technical level, there are frequent entrances and exits in the farce format. Props end up in the wrong hands, and the action moves at an increasingly rapid pace. All of this is true in this scene, with characters running in and out of various rooms, and Lady Chiltern's letter ending up in Mrs. Cheveley's hands (which triggers further misunderstandings and drama). Sir Robert, in particular, drives the action of the scene into a faster pace, through his explosive temper.

The most important element of farce is the way that characters have clearly defined goals that they pursue with focus, intent, and increasing anxiety. In other words, all the comedy and all the extreme actions and reactions are grounded in real emotions. This is clearly true of the farce in this scene, in that Sir Robert's desires are clearly grounded in very real despair, Goring's are grounded in concern for the well being of both Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern, and Mrs. Cheveley's are grounded in greed. Once again, the play makes its thematic point through the use of style. Even though our perception is that the characters are behaving in extreme ways, we are reminded throughout that they're doing so because of very real feelings.

An important piece of information that functions as both a reminder and a piece of foreshadowing is Sir Robert's mention of the debate in the House of Commons on the Argentine Canal question. We are reminded of the debate's importance to the plot, as well as of the two different promises Sir Robert made to Mrs. Cheveley and to Lady Chiltern. As a result, suspense is generated about what Sir Robert is going to say.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

Goring reacts with intense surprise when he sees Mrs. Cheveley, and then says he's glad she came by. He says that he has advice to give her. Mrs. Cheveley jokes that a woman should never be given anything they can't wear. They banter about how stubborn and willful she is, and then Goring comes right out and says he knows why she's there - to sell him Sir Robert's letter. She admits that he's right and tells him that she doesn't have the letter with her. She informs him that she doesn't want money. She reminds him that he loved her once, and that he ended their engagement over a relationship with another man that she says he just imagined. Conversation reveals that, at the time of the engagement, Mrs. Cheveley was poor and looking for a wealthy husband. She only entered into the second relationship for the money. She believes that Goring still loves her. She says that when she saw Goring at the Chilterns' party, she realized that he was the only man she ever loved. If he agrees to her proposal, she'll give him Sir Robert's letter as soon as tomorrow. Goring tells her that he'd be a bad husband, but Mrs. Cheveley says she's already had two and that she enjoyed them immensely.

After some pointed banter about her marriage history, Mrs. Cheveley asks whether Goring will really let Sir Robert be ruined rather than marry someone who is still an attractive woman. They argue about who is really being ruined, Sir Robert or Lady Chiltern, with Mrs. Cheveley confessing that she has always hated Lady Chiltern and now hates her more than ever. When Goring describes what she's about to do as "vile," she says it's nothing more or less than a business transaction. Goring says her "transaction" is a loathsome result of living in a loathsome age. Even while she was speaking of love, she forgot that she deliberately tried to destroy a good woman. Mrs. Cheveley says that she only went to visit Lady Chiltern to find out about her brooch, and that what she said to Lady Chiltern was a reaction to her arrogance.

When Goring reveals that he has the brooch, Mrs. Cheveley says that she's glad to get it back, referring to it as a present and asking him to pin it on. He starts to do so, but then suddenly clasps it on her wrist. Mrs. Cheveley says that she didn't know it could be worn as a bracelet, and asks how Goring knew. He says he'd seen it worn that way on the arm of the woman from whom Mrs. Cheveley stole it, a cousin to whom he'd given it as a wedding present. He tells how a servant was blamed for the bracelet's disappearance and dismissed, how he recognized the bracelet when he found it at the Chilterns', and how he'd planned to keep it until he could discover who the thief was. We understand at this point that this is the reason he asked Lady Chiltern for her guest list - he wanted to inspect it for possibilities about who the thief was.

Mrs. Cheveley says the story isn't true, vows to deny it, and tries to remove the bracelet but finds she can't. Goring tells her that she won't be able to take it off without knowing where the clasp is. He says that he's going to tell his valet to call the police, and adds

that Mrs. Cheveley will be prosecuted for thievery, unless she gives him Sir Robert's letter. Mrs. Cheveley protests and then says she doesn't have the letter with her, but Goring insists. She pulls the letter out and gives it to him. He burns it, commenting on her common sense. Mrs. Cheveley then asks for a glass of water. As Goring is fetching it, she steals Lady Chiltern's letter. When Goring returns with the water, she refuses it and prepares to leave. She promises to never try to hurt Sir Robert again and that she is now, in fact, going to try to help him. When Goring asks what she means, she taunts him by saying she's going to send Sir Robert the love letter that Lady Chiltern apparently sent Goring, quoting the text of the letter to prove that she has it. She taunts that Sir Robert will be glad to know how faithless his wife and best friend are. Goring threatens her to take it by force and rushes at her, but Mrs. Cheveley quickly rings the bell for the valet, who instantly appears. She tells him that Goring called to get him to call her a cab, and goes out. Goring lights a cigarette, frustrated.

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

Elements of farce continue in this scene, particularly in the increasing desperation of both Goring and Mrs. Cheveley which manifests in quick thinking and inspired choices on both their parts - Goring's in the use of the bracelet and Mrs. Cheveley in her quickly thought out plan to steal the letter. The stakes are raised for both characters, as they realize just how much they've got to lose. As a result, the stakes also rise for Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern. Interestingly, as the stakes rise, the level of humor in the situation shrinks nearly into non-existence. We see, therefore, how the key element of farce is also the key element of drama - conflict arising from intensely felt desires and the actions characters take to achieve those desires.

Again in this section, passing references make important points. The most interesting of these is Goring's reference to the current age in which "loathsome" transactions like Mrs. Cheveley's are commonplace. This is a deliberate echo of Sir Robert's earlier comments on how the Baron taught him that the language of power and success in this "age" was money. The suggestion here is that for all his words of courage, Sir Robert's past transaction was as awful to him as Mrs. Cheveley's is in the present.

Another passing reference with an important point is Goring's protest that he'd make a bad husband, and Mrs. Cheveley's responding comment about her two previous husbands. What appears as a result of these comments is another level of irony to the play's title, showing how the "ideal" of what a husband should be is different from person to person.

As previously discussed, the bracelet in this scene becomes one of the play's few symbols, representing the power of the past over the present. By clasping it on Mrs. Cheveley's arm, Goring is indicating how she is ruled by what has happened rather than by what could happen - specifically her hatred of Lady Chiltern, her attempted use of Sir Robert's past crime as blackmail, and her feelings of love for Lord Goring. There is also symbolic value in the fact that it's Goring who puts the bracelet on her, since Goring is the character who has repeatedly advised the Chilterns to move beyond the past and

embrace the future, Sir Robert through confession and Lady Chiltern through forgiveness. In other words, Goring is portrayed here as symbolic of moving into the future, while Mrs. Cheveley is portrayed as being trapped by the past. This is perhaps a secondary theme of the play: a perspective on life that is defined by past experiences limits possibilities for the future. This is in the same way that perspectives, defined by narrow opinions, limit possibilities for future growth and deeper affection.

Act 4, Part 1

Act 4, Part 1 Summary

Goring arrives at the Chilterns', and is told by a servant that Lady Chiltern hasn't yet come down. Mabel has just come in from riding, and Sir Robert is still at the Foreign Office. He's also told that Caversham is in another room, and has been waiting to see Sir Robert. After the servant goes, Caversham comes in, demanding to know whether Goring has thought about becoming engaged. Goring tells him that he has hopes of being engaged before lunch. Caversham then asks whether Goring has read the Times newspaper, saying that Sir Robert gave a rousing speech in the House of Commons the night before, denouncing the Argentine Canal scheme. Caversham quotes compliments on Sir Robert's speech from the paper, saying he thinks Goring should go into politics. When Goring says he isn't interested, Caversham then tells him that he should get engaged to Mabel. He and Goring banter about whether Mabel would, or should, marry him.

Mabel then comes in and converses pleasantly with Caversham, ignoring Goring completely. He repeatedly calls for her attention; until finally, she tells him that after breaking their appointment to go riding, she doesn't ever want to speak to him again. She asks Caversham if he's able to make Goring behave any better. Caversham says he's tried but can't, and after more banter about how useless Goring is, goes out. After discussing with Goring how awful people who break their appointments are, Mabel prepares to leave. Goring asks her to stay, saying he's got something to say to her. Mabel excitedly asks whether it's a proposal. She says that it's the second one today and reveals that Tommy proposed to her again that morning. After talking about how silly Tommy is, Goring proclaims that he loves Mabel and, when she jokes about how he might have told her so before, he tells her to be serious. She tells him that she adores him, and agrees to marry him. After they share a kiss, Mabel tells him that she has to go upstairs and tell Lady Chiltern the good news.

Lady Chiltern comes in. After exchanging compliments with Mabel and greetings with Goring, Mabel goes out, saying she'll be waiting in the conservatory for Goring to come and see her. When she's gone, Goring tells Lady Chiltern that he's burned the letter with which Mrs. Cheveley had threatened Sir Robert. After Lady Chiltern reacts to the good news, Goring then tells her that Mrs. Cheveley stole the letter she wrote him and plans to send it to Sir Robert as evidence that she (Lady Chiltern) and Goring are having an affair. After telling her everything that happened the night before, Goring urges Lady Chiltern to tell Sir Robert that it was she, not Mrs. Cheveley, whom he was expecting. Lady Chiltern refuses, and also doesn't allow Goring to tell Sir Robert. She plans how she can intercept the letter before it gets to Sir Robert. Together, she and Goring agree to get Sir Robert's secretary to watch out for the letter. However, as Lady Chiltern is going out to find the secretary, she sees Sir Robert coming with the letter in his hand.

Sir Robert comes in, without noticing Goring. Conversation reveals that Sir Robert has interpreted the letter as a love letter written to him. As Lady Chiltern allows him to believe that's the truth, Goring goes into the conservatory.

Act 4, Part 1 Analysis

The play's principal sub-plot, exploring the relationship between Mabel and Goring, comes to a climax in this section with his proposal of marriage and her acceptance. What's particularly interesting here is the way that, in their dialogue, they both seem to agree to keep their relationship on a superficial, trivial, bantering level. The question is raised about whether Goring, who has revealed himself to be a soul of some sensitivity and wisdom, could ever be happy in a relationship with someone like Mabel, who has revealed herself to be little more than a giddy girl. The play never answers this question directly, but given its satirical perspective on how little husbands and wives know, or want to know, about each other, it seems perfectly possible that she, at least, will be perfectly happy. He's able to give her what he wants, meaning that for her, he is her ideal husband. For Goring, whose goal at this point seems to be exactly that kind of husband simply because he loves Mabel, the situation also seems to be ideal, despite the fact that he proclaims his feelings with such passion suggests that he has a personality of much more depth than his wife to be.

Meanwhile, the play's main plot is moving towards its climax, with the news that Sir Robert spoke against the Argentine Canal scheme. A fact worth noting here is that he does so without knowing that Goring has destroyed the letter from Mrs. Cheveley. This means that in speaking against the scheme, Sir Robert is aware that he faces professional ruin. He is still acting with integrity and from what he truly believes, not just in terms of the scheme, but also in the larger picture of his life. He makes the speech that he does, because he knows that his marriage will be strengthened as a result, even though his career might be ruined. In short, his wife's respect for him and their faith in each other is more important to him than public approval. By speaking what he believes, Sir Robert also becomes an ideal husband.

A sense of farce resurfaces briefly in this section with Sir Robert's misunderstanding about who the letter was written to, exactly the sort of misunderstanding that has brought many a farce to a happy ending. Its purpose here is the same, to trigger a happy reconciliation between Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern, the consequences of which make up the main plot's climax.

Act 4, Part 2

Act 4, Part 2 Summary

Sir Robert tells Lady Chiltern that once he read her letter, he felt so grateful for her love that he felt he could face any difficulty. That's why he made the speech he did. Lady Chiltern tells him that the letter has been destroyed. After rejoicing at his freedom, Sir Robert wonders whether, even though all proof of his youthful indiscretion has disappeared, he should still resign from public life. Lady Chiltern says he should, assuring him they'd have no regrets. He reminds her of her ambitions for him, but she says it was ambition that led him astray when he was younger, and she doesn't value it any more.

Goring comes in. Sir Robert thanks him for his help, and asks whether there's anything he can do to repay him. Goring seems about to suggest something, but is interrupted by the arrival of Caversham. He congratulates Sir Robert and offers him the news that, as a result of his speech, he's going to be offered a seat in the cabinet. Sir Robert seems about to accept it, but then sees his wife looking at him and refuses it, saying his plan is to retire immediately from public life. Caversham reacts with shock, asking Lady Chiltern to talk some sense into her husband. Lady Chiltern says she agrees with Sir Robert, and urges him to write his letter of refusal right away. Sir Robert goes out to write the letter, and Lady Chiltern goes with him.

Caversham wonders aloud why the Chilterns would react in the way they have. Goring tells him it's what they think is the right thing to do. Caversham, still shocked, prepares to leave, but Goring convinces him to go into the conservatory and talk with Mabel. Caversham goes out, just as Lady Chiltern comes in. Goring speaks bluntly to her, accusing her of doing the same thing to Sir Robert as Mrs. Cheveley was trying to do - ruin Sir Robert. He speaks at length about how withdrawing from public life would destroy everything Sir Robert has worked for, saying the needs of a man's life are different from a woman's. Sir Robert's resigning from public life is keeping him from being who he needs to be. When Lady Chiltern reminds him that resigning was Sir Robert's idea, Goring tells her to not accept the sacrifice he's preparing to make, saying they'd both regret it later.

Sir Robert comes in with the first draft of his letter. Lady Chiltern reads it, and then tears it up, explaining that Goring has just explained to her how important it is for him to remain in public life and service. Sir Robert embraces her, and then thanks Goring, asking again how he can repay him. Goring reminds him that he (Sir Robert) is Mabel's guardian, and says the best thing he can do is consent to their marriage. Sir Robert tells him that would be impossible, saying that the only thing worse than a loveless marriage is a marriage in which there is love on only one side. He goes on to say that, because he discovered Mrs. Cheveley in Goring's home, he believes that she and Goring are still in love. Goring says nothing, but Lady Chiltern speaks up and tells Sir Robert that it was she, and not Mrs. Cheveley, whom Goring was expecting. She explains how the letter

came to be written and how it got into the wrong hands. She is about to reveal what Mrs. Cheveley was going to try to get him to believe, but Sir Robert cuts her off, saying he would never have believed Mrs. Cheveley. He then consents to Goring and Mabel's marriage.

Mabel and Caversham come in, with Mabel teasing Goring about how she likes his father's conversation better. Goring tells Caversham that Sir Robert has changed his mind, and will accept the cabinet position. Caversham says that if all goes well, Sir Robert will be Prime Minister someday. A servant comes in and announces that lunch is ready. Lady Chiltern invites Caversham and Goring to stay, and they accept. As they go in, Caversham jokes with Mabel about making Goring an ideal husband, and Mabel says she doesn't think she'd like that, saying her husband can be who he chooses. All she wants to be is a real wife. As they all go in, Sir Robert lingers, deep in thought. Lady Chiltern comes back to find him, and he asks whether she loves him or just pities him. She tells him that she loves him more than ever, saying they're at a new beginning in their lives.

Act 4, Part 2 Analysis

The play's main plot reaches its climax in this section. The last remaining truths are revealed, the last remaining misunderstandings are cleared up, and the play's central thematic question is once again addressed. The warning against limited perspectives plays out one last time through the Chilterns' near-refusal of the cabinet position. This is dramatized on two levels. The first is the most obvious, as both Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern base their initial reactions to Caversham's offer on their limited perspective of what is the right and dutiful thing to do. The second is more subtle, as once again Goring reveals himself to have wisdom beyond what we, and other characters in the play, expect as he tells the Chilterns that the definition of what is right extends beyond what is morally right to what is right for a person's soul. In other words, he's saying that staying in politics is right for both Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern as human beings. Leaving politics would only satisfy the demands and dictates of society and its moral values. By doing so, he's again dramatizing the play's main theme. Goring again shows how he, the character whom we expect to have the least interesting mind, has in fact the most interesting.

This point about humanist vs. societal values is made again in the play's final moments in Mabel's brief conversation with Caversham, in which she says she doesn't want Goring to be an ideal husband, just who he is. This puts her, at the beginning of her marriage, in the same place that Lady Chiltern has only just gotten to, having been in her marriage for several years. The point is made yet again in the play's final two lines, in which Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert connect on the more humanist level of genuine love and relationship, as opposed to the more societal level of moral expectation. In these final moments, the play is urging a broadening of perspectives, a deepening of compassion, and a strengthening of personal, as opposed to ethical, courage.

An important point is made about the significance of small details. This occurs when Goring says nothing after being accused by Sir Robert of still being involved with Mrs. Cheveley. He does this, because Lady Chiltern had previously asked him to not tell Sir Robert that it was she who was coming to see him. By not speaking, Goring is simultaneously honoring his commitment to Lady Chiltern, reinforcing the secondary theme relating to the value of personal integrity, at the same time as he's giving her the chance to also live with integrity - be honest, and confess the truth to Sir Robert. This means that by saying what she does, Lady Chiltern is, like her husband and Goring, living with courage, courage based on integrity and honesty. This is very different from the way she was previously seen to be living, from a place of narrow mindedness.

In this scene, Lady Chiltern demonstrates how, throughout the play, she has gone on a journey of transformation from being judgmental to much more open-minded and open hearted. It's a journey embodying the play's theme in a similar way to how Goring embodies it as a character. Through both characters, we learn the value of broadening perspectives to include acceptance of that which might previously have been seen as vile or immoral, a circumstance given an interesting spin when we again remember that the play was written by one of society's most famously persecuted homosexuals.

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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 Basildon. 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.

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 good-enough 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.

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.

Historical Context

The Dandy

Dandies, of which there are many in Wilde's play, are a phenomenon of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-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.

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 form [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."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Dell'Amico is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Dell'Amico considers Wilde and his play within the context of Irish-British colonial relations.

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 "artiface." 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 high-toned *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.

Critical Essay #2

Guyette, a longtime journalist, received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh. In this essay, Guyette discusses how Wilde uses scathing wit to create a play that, ultimately, espouses tolerance and compassion.

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 one-liners 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 high-ranking 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 dong 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.

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 Cartlidge 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 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.

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.

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, multi-ethnic metropolises.

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.

Further Study

Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

This work is currently the most thorough and definitive biography of Wilde. In it, students of Wilde can read in minute detail about the author's life and career.

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.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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