Lady Windermere's Fan Study Guide

Lady Windermere's Fan by Oscar Wilde

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Lady Windermere's Fan was Oscar Wilde's first produced play, and it was an instant success on the London stage. Chronicling a series of misunderstandings and deceptions in the high society world of Victorian London, critics and audiences alike were charmed by Wilde's trademark wit and intelligence.

In the play, Lady Windermere considers leaving her husband of two years when she believes he's been unfaithful with a woman who turns out to be her own mother. Remarkably, it will be the mother who sets her straight without ever revealing her identity.

In his letters, Wilde claimed that he did not want the play to be viewed as "a mere question of pantomime and clowning"; he was interested in the piece as a psychological study. Although the play has been deemed outdated by recent critics, *Lady Windermere's Fan* continues to entertain audiences all over the world.

Author Biography

In 1854 Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin to affluent parents. His father was a prominent surgeon and archaeologist; his mother was a witty poet, Irish nationalist, and feminist.

Wilde excelled at the Portola Royal school and then at Trinity College, where he took the Gold Medal for Greek. In 1878 he won a scholarship to Magdalen College at Oxford.

Wilde attracted a crowd of admirers for his witty, intellectual lectures and his outrageous cult of "aestheticism." He believed in art-for-art's-sake, a philosophy he had learned from his association with John Ruskin, an art critic and Oxford don.

A very successful lecture tour of America in the early 1880s on "The Principles of Aestheticism" earned him much-needed income as well as an international reputation.

His marriage to Constance Mary Lloyd in 1884 produced two children; it was during this time he wrote his best works: The Picture of *Dorian Gray* (1891), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and The Importance of *Being Earnest* (1895).

These works brought him financial success and the admiration of the literary circles. His reputation as an insightful, witty, and urbane playwright was established worldwide.

In the early 1890s, at the peak of his career, Wilde entered into a destructive romantic relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed "Bosie." After Bosie's disapproving father, Lord Queensbeery, insulted Wilde, the playwright foolishly sued for defamation of character. Queensbeery's return suit for "depravity" resulted in Wilde's conviction for sodomy and a two-year jail sentence.

After serving his sentence, Wilde emerged from jail bankrupt, scandalized, and spiritually bereft. He lived alone in France until his death from cerebral meningitis in 1900. His remains are buried in Paris.

Plot Summary

Act One

The play opens in Lady Margaret Winder-mere's home, where she is arranging roses for a party later that evening in celebration of her birthday. Lord Darlington visits, and Margaret chides him for flirting with her. He contends that a woman whose husband of two years is unfaithful has a right to "console herself."

Lady Windermere fails to recognize his oblique reference to her husband, and calls herself a Puritan with "hard and fast rules" for fidelity. Lord Darlington continues to flirt with her, but she ignores him.

He leaves and the Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Lady Agatha Carlisle, enter. The Duchess cattily reports that Lord Windermere has been spending time and money on a Mrs. Erlynne, whose social status is questionable. The Duchess admits that her own husband has had his "little aberrations," and assumes all men are immoral.

Yet the Duchess is anxious to marry off her daughter Agatha, saying "a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection."

After they depart, Lady Windermere looks through her husband's desk and discovers payments to Mrs. Erlynne in his secret bankbook. When he comes in and finds her looking at it, he gets angry. He demands that his wife invite Mrs. Erlynne to their party in order to help the woman back into society. Lady Windermere flatly refuses.

He addresses an invitation to Mrs. Erlynne himself. Outraged, Lady Windermere threatens to hit the infamous woman with her new birthday fan when she arrives. Lord Windermere protests and she storms offstage.

As the curtain drops, he agonizes over what to do about the situation. Apparently there is something to his relationship with Mrs. Erlynne, for he groans "I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her."

Act Two

The Windermere's party is in full swing, and the guests are being announced. The Duchess of Berwick has advised Agatha to dance with Mr. Hopper of Australia, a prospective suitor.

Lord Augustus Lorton, brother of the Duchess, asks Lord Windermere how Mrs. Erlynne can gain respectability. It seems that Lorton hopes to marry her. He is reassured by her invitation to tonight's ball, for it paves her way into "this demmed thing called society."

Mrs. Erlynne appears and smoothly makes her way from guest to guest, especially the men. Their wives glare indignantly. In the meantime, Lady Windermere remains cold to her husband, and seeks comfort from Lord Darlington, who takes advantage of her mood by confessing his love and offering to take her away.

At first shocked, Margaret asks for time to see if her husband would return to her. Defeated, Lord Darlington announces that he will leave England the next day and bids her goodbye.

As the music stops and guests come back into the room, the Duchess of Berwick talks approvingly of Mrs. Erlynne to Margaret, yet advises her to get her husband away from the woman.

Agatha whispers to her mother that Mr. Hopper has proposed. With her goal in hand, the Duchess now takes full charge, insisting that the couple remain in London rather than return to Hopper's home in Sydney.

Two gentlemen offer alternate views to Mrs. Erlynne's presence at the ball: one says that Lady Windermere must have "common sense," while the other credits Lord Windermere with cleverly hiding his indiscretion in the open.

Mrs. Erlynne informs Lord Windermere that Lord Lorton has proposed; in addition, he has asked for 2000 to 2500 pounds a year from him. Annoyed but compliant, Windermere exits with her to the terrace to discuss the details.

As the music strikes up again, Lady Winder-mere decides to run away with Lord Darlington and leave her husband. She leaves a farewell letter on her desk. Mrs. Erlynne enters and reads it.

She lies to Windermere about the letter's contents and calls for her carriage. Lord Augustus enters with a bouquet for Mrs. Erlynne and proposes. Without responding, she instructs him to take Windermere to his club until morning, and he complies.

Act Three

Alone in Lord Darlington's rooms, Lady Winder-mere vacillates between staying and going back to her husband. When Mrs. Erlynne arrives, Margaret recoils in contempt of her rival. Mrs. Erlynne pleads with her to return to her husband, denying any relationship with him.

Lady Windermere is moved when Mrs. Erlynne reminds her of her duty to her child. She tearfully decides to go home, but upon hearing voices, they both hide behind the curtains. Lord Augustus (' Tuppy" to his friends), Lord Darlington, Dumby, Cecil Graham, and Lord Windermere arrive, having been turned out of the club.

The men speak cynically of women and society as they settle into a game of cards. This scene displays Wilde's wit as the men banter back and forth. Then Cecil sees Lady

Windermere's fan on a table. He shows it to Tuppy for a chuckle at Darlington, who has been moralizing, for apparently he has a woman in his rooms.

Windermere's reaction to seeing his wife's fan, however, is dramatic. He threatens to search Darlington's rooms. Darlington refuses. Only the sudden appearance of Mrs. Erlynne, stepping out from behind the curtain, stops a probable fight. She pretends to having taken Lady Windermere's fan by mistake. The men respond variously with contempt, astonishment, and mockery, as the curtain falls.

Act Four

Back at home, Lady Windermere lies on a sofa, wondering why Mrs. Erlynne disgraced herself to save her reputation. Lord Windermere comes in and sympathetically suggests a visit to the country. He also expresses a change of heart about Mrs. Erlynne, whom he now considers 'as bad as a woman can be."

His wife defends her and insists on seeing her once more before they depart. Lady Winder-mere almost confesses the truth, but Parker interrupts them. He is carrying Lady Windermere's lost fan and Mrs. Erlynne's card on a tray. Margaret tells Parker to invite her up, in spite of her husband' s protest.

Mrs. Erlynne enters, and apologizes for taking the fan. She announces that she is leaving England and wants a photograph of Margaret with her child. While Lady Windermere goes upstairs to find one, Lord Windermere confronts Mrs. Erlynne for causing his first quarrel with his wife, and for misrepresenting herself. It is revealed to the audience that Mrs. Erlynne is Margaret's long-lost mother.

It is true that Mrs. Erlynne had been extorting money from him, but she has had a change of heart, too. She fails to convince him of her new sincerity, but revels in her new relationship with her daughter who never learns that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother.

Before leaving, Mrs. Erlynne offers Lady Windermere a piece of advice: not to tell Arthur of nearly leaving him. Lord Augustus arrives and accepts Mrs. Erlynne's explanation that she was only looking for him at Darlington's home. He proposes to her again. Margaret comments that he is, indeed, "marrying a very good woman."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens in the "morning-room" of the Windermere house, where Lady Margaret Windermere is arranging roses in preparation for a "small but select" ball she and her husband are hosting that evening in honor of her birthday. Parker, the butler, announces that Lord Darlington has come to call, and shows him in. Darlington begins to flirt with Lady Windermere, who very kindly but firmly tries to discourage his attentions. She says she does not like compliments but tells him she thinks he is really a good man who is only pretending to be worse than most men. He answers that, "so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad."

Lady Windermere makes it plain that she is not going to stoop to the Victorian fad of exaggerated flirtation, and despite the clues Darlington gives her, she remains unaware that he is actually in love with her. He finally makes a thinly disguised accusation that her husband is having an affair with another woman, but she doesn't pick up on that either.

Finally, the Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Lady Agatha Carlisle, are announced and ushered into the morning room. In the course of the Duchess' silly chatter, the accusation against Lady Windermere's husband is made so plainly that Lady Windermere can't misunderstand. The Duchess tells Lady Windermere that her husband has been seen often with a Mrs. Erlynne. She also tells her that Lord Windermere is suspected of having paid Mrs. Erlynne enormous sums of money.

Lady Windermere at first refuses to believe it, protesting to the Duchess, "It's impossible! We are only two years married. Our child is but six months old!" But as soon as her guests leave, Lady Windermere struggles between wanting to trust her husband, and wanting to examine his bankbook to discover whether he has really been having an affair. She finally goes to his desk and pulls out his bankbook to examine it. To her relief, she finds nothing. However, as she's returning it to its place, she notices another book, this one locked. She cuts it open and finds Mrs. Erlynne's name on page after page, accounting the different sums that have been paid to her over a period of time.

Just as the truth of her husband's infidelity becomes apparent to Lady Windermere, her husband walks into the room and asks whether she has received the birthday present he has sent her - a fan, inscribed with her name. He sees his private bankbook in her hands, and she confronts him with the evidence of his affair. Lord Windermere admits that the woman has made some mistakes in the past, but insists she is trying to improve herself and that he is not having an affair with her. He claims he has never loved anyone but his wife, but does not explain why he is paying Mrs. Erlynne. His wife, therefore, cannot believe the relationship is innocent, and is insulted when he then asks her to help Mrs. Erlynne back into society's good graces by inviting the woman to her

birthday ball that evening. When Lady Windermere refuses to do it, he writes the invitation himself, and his wife promises that if he invites Mrs. Erlynne, she will publicly insult the woman. She leaves the room, and the mystery about Mrs. Erlynne is heightened when Lord Windermere says, "What shall I do! I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her."

Act 1 Analysis

Wilde uses the first act to set up his theme, and does so using two of his favorite devices: epigrams and paradoxes. Epigrams are short, witty quips that often express paradoxical statements (which are statements that may be true even though they sound contradictory.) One example is Darlington's famous line from this Act, in which he states, "I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation." Wilde uses this sort of device, not only in the characters' conversation, but also in entire themes in his works by taking opposite-sounding ideas and balancing them against each other skillfully.

In this scene, Wilde sets up Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere as opposites in the sense that Lady Windermere sees people simply as "good" or "bad," while Darlington sees that this is too simplistic, and believes people are more complex.

For example, Lord Darlington says, "do you think seriously that women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?" and Lady Windermere answers that they should not be forgiven and the same standard should apply to men. Lord Darlington then tells her, "I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules." Lady Darlington's response is, "If we had 'these hard and fast rules,' we should find life much more simple."

Wilde also sets up Darlington and the Duchess of Berwick as opposites in a different way than Darlington and Lady Windermere. The Duchess claims to be "good" but her statements are so contradictory that it is easy to see her hypocrisy - she is not as good as she appears. Her view of "good people" and "bad people" is a little more sexist than Lady Windermere's, but still simplistic. She sees women as "good" and men as "bad," but is still anxious to get her daughter married off to one. She comments that all men are bad without any exception, and expresses sympathy that Lady Windermere's only child is a boy. The rest of her conversation makes it clear that despite her claim that all women are good, she is not a very nice woman at all as she has something insulting to say about nearly everyone she knows.

Darlington knows he is neither all good nor all bad, but he is also a hypocrite, in that he is not as bad as tries to appear. In answer to a remark from the Duchess in which she declines to introduce her daughter to him because he is "far too wicked," Darlington answers flippantly. "Don't say that, Duchess. As a wicked man, I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course, they only say it behind my back." The audience is meant to understand that Darlington would like to be taken as being more wicked than he really is.

Lady Windermere, on the other hand, is meant by Wilde to be taken at face value. Typically, his more sincere characters are not given as many epigrammatic or paradoxical lines, but speak in straightforward, earnest terms. It is in such terms that she declares to Lord Darlington and the Duchess that she will never have anyone in her house about whom there is any scandal.

Lord Windermere, when he enters the scene, is also meant to be taken at face value, since his conversation is as straightforward as his wife's. One begins to get the impression he is not as simplistic as his wife in his views of classifying people as "good" or "bad," however. He seems willing to believe that Mrs. Erlynne may have committed some bad acts in the past, but allows that she may still be a good person.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The second Act takes place in the drawing room of the Windermere house, with the activity of the ball visible through an adjoining doorway. Lady Windermere is receiving her arriving guests, and the Duchess of Berwick is sitting nearby managing her daughter's dance card.

As the guests arrive, Lord Windermere tries to speak to his wife again, but she is busy greeting people, and he falls into a conversation with Lord Augustus Lorton. Lord Augustus begins asking Windermere about Mrs. Erlynne, and it becomes evident to the audience that Lord Augustus is romantically interested in her, and is looking for assurances from Windermere that she is both respectable and available. He seems pleased and relieved when Windermere tells him Mrs. Erlynne has been invited to the ball that very night, because he is sure Lady Windermere would not have allowed this if Mrs. Erlynne were not respectable.

Windermere finally gets a chance to speak to his wife, and tries once more to convince her to be civil to Mrs. Erlynne so that society will accept the woman. Lady Windermere is hurt that he is insisting on an action that seems unreasonable, and begins to turn to Darlington for friendship, despite her previous belief that she would never encourage him.

When Mrs. Erlynne arrives, Lady Windermere is cold to her, but is too kind a person after all to insult her as she had intended, and so retreats to Darlington, convinced she is a coward and not as true to her convictions as she had thought. Darlington wishes to protect her from her husband's seeming infidelity, and declares his love for her and his desire that she should leave her husband and come away with him. Begging her to forget that society would not look kindly on that, he promises she would be safe with him, and asks her to make a choice on the spot. Life with him, or the approval of society.

Lady Windermere is not ready to make the choice - she still hopes her husband's affection will be returned to her. When she cannot choose, Darlington takes his leave bitterly, saying he will be leaving England the next day forever.

In the meantime, Mrs. Erlynne is making the best of her return to society, and has procured several social invitations for future engagements from some of the ladies present. The Duchess is also seeing good fruits of her efforts to make a match for her daughter. As the guests begin to leave, Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere are conversing, and Lady Windermere is watching in pain and scorn from a distance. If Lady Windermere could hear their conversation, she might feel some relief, but only the audience knows Mrs. Erlynne is telling Lord Windermere of her intention to marry Lord Augustus, and asks him to make a financial settlement upon her for their upcoming

marriage. She seems to be able to demand money freely from Lord Windermere, as though she has some kind of hold over him. She also comments that Lady Windermere has changed greatly since she had last seen her twenty years earlier. As Lady Windermere is only two years married, and seems to have no recollection of knowing Mrs. Erlynne, the audience can assume that Lady Windermere was a small child at the time, but is left to wonder about anything further for the moment.

Lady Windermere watches her husband and Mrs. Erlynne go out to the terrace to finish their conversation, and immediately feels she has made a mistake in turning down Lord Darlington's proposal. She writes her husband a letter, telling him she's leaving, and goes to find Lord Darlington.

In the meantime, Mrs. Erlynne comes into the drawing room to say her goodbyes, but cannot find Lady Windermere. Parker tells her Lady Windermere has left the house, leaving a letter for his lordship on the table. This alarms Mrs. Erlynne, and as soon as Parker goes out, she picks up the letter, opens and reads it. Becoming agitated, she says, "Oh, how terrible! The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! And how bitterly I have been punished for it! No; my punishment, my real punishment is now!"

It appears from this statement that Mrs. Erlynne may be Lady Windermere's mother, and that despite her flippancy and seeming lack of feeling up to this point, she may be showing evidence of having a heart. This is confirmed when Lord Windermere enters the room, and Mrs. Erlynne hides the letter from him, determined he will not know his wife has left him. She then convinces Lord Augustus to take Lord Windermere to his club after the ball so that he will be out of the house for awhile, and she leaves as well, to find her daughter.

Act 2 Analysis

Wilde continues his use of flippant dialogue to reveal the hypocrisy he sees in Victorian high society. While our issues may be different, the same general type of hypocrisy is evident in modern middle-class society in many ways as well, which is why his plays are still able to amuse.

For instance, the mercenary nature of the Duchess is revealed as she scratches out two names on her daughter's dance card, with the comment, "No nice girl should ever waltz with such particularly younger sons! It looks so fast!" While it's true that in Victorian times the waltz was considered a bit "fast," -in other words, an inappropriate dance for a young girl, the rest of her comment implies that the Duchess would not mind her daughter doing inappropriate things with an elder son, who would stand to inherit his family's wealth.

In another case, Wilde pokes fun at people who have no opinions of their own, using a character named "Mr. Dumby." Dumby agrees heartily with one guest, who declares the

season has been "Quite delightful," and immediately afterward agrees just as readily with the opinion of the Duchess that the season has been "Dreadfully dull!"

As Wilde's plot thickens, Lady Windermere's previously straightforward manner becomes more flippant and epigrammatic as she becomes more disillusioned about her husband's love for her. When her husband asks her to trust him, she answers uncharacteristically, "London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognize them. They look so thoroughly unhappy." Lady Windermere is slowly coming down from her perch and realizing that her principles may not be quite so hard and fast as she had thought them. This is the first step in allowing her to be more understanding of the failings of others. She realizes that she is as capable of making mistakes as anyone else when she decides to go away with Lord Darlington.

At the same time, Mrs. Erlynne's character is also undergoing some changes of heart. This is revealed to the audience when she determines to go after her daughter to save her. She says, "What can I do? What can I do? I feel a passion awakening within me that I never felt before. What can it mean? The daughter must not be like the mother - that would be terrible. How can I save her? How can I save my child?"

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

This Act takes place in Lord Darlington's apartment. Mrs. Erlynne finds Lady Windermere there, waiting for Lord Darlington who has not yet returned. She begs Lady Windermere to return to her husband, but Lady Windermere is horrified to see her and becomes more determined to leave with Lord Darlington. For the first time, Mrs. Erlynne finds out what Lady Windermere's suspects of her, and is astonished. She learns that Lady Windermere now believes that Lord Windermere found the letter, and rather than come to retrieve her himself, sent Mrs. Erlynne after her.

Mrs. Erlynne tries to explain that Lord Windermere has not seen the letter, and that she has come to save Lady Windermere from ruining her life, but Lady Windermere finds this difficult to believe. Finally, Mrs. Erlynne appeals to Lady Windermere on behalf of her son. She says, "...your husband loves you. He has never swerved for a moment from the love he bears you. But even if he had a thousand loves, you must stay with your child...your place is with your child." This speech causes Lady Windermere to burst into tears, and Mrs. Erlynne is about to take her home, when they hear voices and realize Lord Darlington is returning with guests. Lady Windermere recognizes her husband's voice among them, and panics. Mrs. Erlynne sends her to hide in the curtain and intends to face the men herself until she hears Lord Augustus among them and realizes it may hurt her chances for marriage to him if she were found in another man's apartment in the middle of the night. She decides she should also hide.

As the men come in and settle down with drinks and cigars, it becomes evident from their conversation they have been turned out of the pub and have forced their company on Darlington. One of the men, a Cecil Graham, suggests a game of cards, but is refused, first by Lord Windermere, and then by Lord Augustus, who says he has promised Mrs. Erlynne he will never play or drink again. (Never mind that he has just poured himself a brandy and soda). During the banter that follows, Darlington can't help referring to his own tragedy by speaking mysteriously about the "only good woman he has ever met" and the purity of his love for her. Mr. Graham discovers a woman's fan in the room (Lady Windermere's), and thinks it is a good joke that Darlington has been moralizing about goodness and purity and love, when all the time he must have a woman hidden in his apartment. He shows it first to Lord Augustus, and then to Lord Windermere, who immediately recognizes it and loses his temper. He announces his intention of searching the apartment for his wife, when Mrs. Erlynne takes matters into her own hands and reveals her presence, to save Lady Windermere's reputation. She explains that she has taken Lady Windermere's fan by mistake instead of her own, and Lord Augustus turns away from her in disgust. She has sacrificed her future for the sake of Lady Windermere's.

Act 3 Analysis

It is during the conversation between the two women in Darlington's apartment that Lady Windermere begins revise her opinion of Mrs. Erlynne. There is very little use of the epigram in their exchange, since Wilde means to show that the better sides of both women are emerging. Mrs. Erlynne insists that her relationship with Lord Windermere is innocent, and assures Lady Windermere that, "had it ever occurred to me that such a monstrous suspicion would have entered your mind, I would have died rather than have crossed your life or his - oh! Died, gladly died!" Lady Windermere's response is, "You talk as if you had a heart. Women like you have no heart." But there is a softening of her reserve anyway shortly afterward.

After this sincere conversation, Wilde again makes use of clever contradictory banter when the men return to the stage. Mr. Dumby complains about the closing of the pub, sinking into his chair and yawning even as he says, "The lively part of the evening is only just beginning."

Cecil Graham teases Lord Augustus about Mrs. Erlynne, and is chided by Lord Windermere, who says, "Well, that is no business of yours, is it, Cecil?" Cecil answers, "That is why it interests me. My own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's."

Later, Cecil moralizes about people who moralize, expressing the opinion that women with consciences are generally unattractive. When Lord Augustus agrees with him, Cecil is disappointed. "Whenever people agree with me," he says, "I always feel I must be wrong."

Lord Darlington accuses them all of being cynics, though he is perhaps the worst of all of them, and reveals it in his reply to Cecil, who asks, "What is a cynic?" Darlington answers, "A man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing."

Interestingly, despite the fact that the men seem to consider themselves worldier and less judgmental than women the women do, their reaction to Mrs. Erlynne's appearance at the end of the scene is perhaps a bit harsh. Even Lord Windermere, who knows her past, is shocked and treats her with contempt, and no one considers that there may be an innocent reason for her presence.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

The final Act opens, like the first Act, in the Windermere morning room. Lady Windermere is alone, wondering what happened at Lord Darlington's after she had taken advantage of the fray and slipped out unnoticed. She doesn't know what time her husband came in afterward, and is afraid Mrs. Erlynne may have told the truth about her after she left.

She decides she will tell her husband about her actions the night before, but when he comes in a few moments later she doesn't get the chance. He suggests they go away for a while together, and she agrees but insists she must see Mrs. Erlynne once more before they go. He tells her she is not to see Mrs. Erlynne anymore, because he has been mistaken in his good opinion of her. His view of her is now as black and white as his wife's once was - they have switched positions.

Lady Windermere again tries to explain the previous night's activities, to clear Mrs. Erlynne's name, but before she can do so, Mrs. Erlynne herself is announced and comes into the room.

She apologizes to Lady Windermere in front of Lord Windermere for taking the fan by mistake, and says she wanted to return it in person before leaving the country for good. Lady Windermere seems disappointed she is leaving, but agrees to give her a photograph of herself and her baby boy to take with her. She goes away to get it, and while she's out of the room, Lord Windermere tells Mrs. Erlynne in rather harsh terms what he thinks of her behaviour. Mrs. Erlynne does not justify herself, and takes the unjust criticism nobly, although sometimes she responds in a light, flippant tone, as though she really were the heartless woman he thinks her. Finally, when he suggests he will tell his wife the truth about her mother, Mrs. Erlynne makes him promise not to do so, saying, "It is my secret, it is not yours. If I make up my mind to tell her, and I think I will, I shall tell her before I leave this house - if not, I shall never tell her."

Lady Windermere returns with the photograph and Lord Windermere leaves to see if Mrs. Erlynne's carriage has arrived for her. When he is gone, Lady Windermere thanks Mrs. Erlynne for her actions the night before, and tells her she is going to confess everything to her husband to clear Mrs. Erlynne. Mrs. Erlynne makes her promise never to tell him, and never to forget her child. She asks Lady Windermere for her fan as a present, which Lady Windermere is glad to give her, commenting how fortunate it is they both have the same first name, since the fan is inscribed with it.

The arrival of Lord Augustus brings her visit to an end, and he is cold to her. Still, she convinces him to walk her out to her carriage. Alone again, the Windermere's agree there is some good in Mrs. Erlynne after all, and Lady Windermere comments on the lesson she has learned about life. Lord Windermere's opinion of Mrs. Erlynne has

improved, presumably because she left without ever revealing herself to her daughter, and tells his wife, "She is better than one thought her."

Lord Augustus now returns to the morning room a much happier man, and informs the Windermere's that Mrs. Erlynne has explained everything and their engagement is renewed. He tells them Mrs. Erlynne has insisted they will live abroad, and expresses his hearty approval of this condition. The Windermere's congratulate him, and Lady Windermere closes the play with the line, "Ah! You're marrying a very good woman!"

Act 4 Analysis

In the last Act, Wilde shows Lady Windermere's change of heart becoming complete, and uses her to make his statements about the complexity of human nature.

First, Lady Windermere wonders aloud about her own nature. "How securely one thinks one lives - out of reach of temptation, sin, folly. And then suddenly - Oh! Life is terrible. It rules us, we do not rule it." She has found out what she is capable of and it flies in the face of the view she held of herself in Act I, when she tells Lord Darlington she would never have anyone in her house about whom there was any scandal.

Then, Lady Windermere is afraid Mrs. Erlynne may have told Lord Windermere she had been in Lord Darlington's apartment, about to leave the country with him - and she says to herself, "I can fancy a person doing a wonderful act of self-sacrifice, doing it spontaneously, recklessly, nobly - and afterwards finding out that it costs too much. Why should she hesitate between her ruin and mine?" And thinking further, she contrasts her own actions to Mrs. Erlynne's. "How strange! I would have publicly disgraced her in my own house. She accepts public disgrace in the house of another to save me..." This realization makes her see that those she considered "good" (herself) are capable of bad things, while those she considered "bad" (Mrs. Erlynne) are capable of very good and noble things.

Later, to Lord Windermere, she goes into the subject further. "What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice."

In Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde explains some of the inner conflicts that can make a person seem, on the outside, not to care about anything, while on the inside they may care very deeply. We are given insight to the depth of Mrs. Erlynne's feelings of regret about her daughter, but her flippant conversation only makes Lord Windermere more convinced than ever that she has no motherly feeling.

Oscar Wilde's attention to the most basic foibles of human nature makes his plays relevant in a classic way even to a 21st century audience. His themes will always resonate, because people will always misjudge themselves and others, and be tempted to see things in simplistic, black and white terms. Wilde suggests tolerance for others can only come when one understands one's own shortcomings and limitations.

Characters

Agatha

Agatha is the daughter of the Duchess of Berwick. She is passive and only interested in getting married.

Lady Carlisle

See Agatha

Caroline

See Lady Jedburgh

Mrs. Cowper-Cowper

Mrs. Cowper-Cowper is one of the society ladies who attends Lady Windermere's ball.

Lord Darlington

Lord Darlington is in love with Lady Winder-mere, and hints of her husband's apparent infidelity in order to gain her affection. When she does not return his love, he leaves town.

Duchess of Berwick

A manipulative woman, the Duchess of Berwick thrives on the pettiness of high society. She is the one who initiates the series of misunderstandings between Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere by gossiping about Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere.

At the same time, she masterfully orchestrates the marriage of her daughter to Mr. Hopper, an Australian visitor. Once she snags the young man, she begins her next project of making sure the new couple stays in London rather than going to Sydney.

Margaret Erlynne

The mysterious Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Winder-mere's long-lost mother a fact that is not revealed until the late in the play. Lady Windermere never learns her true identity.

Mrs. Erlynne wants desperately to be accepted within her daughter's social circles. She has a reputation as a woman with a shady past, a "divorced woman, going about under an assumed name, a bad woman preying upon life." In other words, she seems to be a woman with no substantial income, and therefore no right to socialize with the Windermeres and their circle.

However, Mrs. Erlynne reveals herself to be a woman of quality, who puts aside her own interests in favor of protecting her child. Having found herself capable of a mother's devotion, she decides to escape in order to spare her daughter further embarrassment. Fortunately, Lord Lorton still loves her and offers his hand in marriage.

Cecil Graham

Cecil Graham is a cynic who trades witty barbs with his pals Windermere, Dumby, and Lorton. He is described as the experienced man about town. He is the one who discovers Lady Windermere's fan in Darlington's rooms.

Mr. Hopper

Mr. Hopper is an Australian man who proposes to Agatha. Although he hopes to take her home to Sydney, the Duchess wants them to remain in England.

Lady Jedburgh

Lady Jedburgh is Cecil Graham's dowager aunt.

Lord Augustus Lorton

The brother of the Duchess of Berwick, Tuppy is a rather simple fellow. He is in love with Mrs. Erlynne and is greatly relieved to learn that she has received an invitation to Lady Windermere's ball, since this serves as an invitation into high society.

He is a very trusting man; he accepts Mrs. Erlynne's excuses and does not rescind his marriage invitation after the scandal.

Parker

Parker is the Windermeres' butler.

Lady Plymdale

Lady Plymdale is the wife of Mr. Dunby. She disapproves of Mrs. Erlynne and of her husband's visits with her.

Rosalie

Rosalie is Lady's Windermere's maid.

Lady Stutfield

One of the society ladies who enjoy the social season.

Tuppy

See Lord Augustus Lorton

Lord Arthur Windermere

For most of the play, it seems that Lord Winder-mere is having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne. Like his wife, Windermere is a sincere and generous person. He is also loyal: even when it is in his self-interest to tell his wife the truth, he keeps Mrs. Erlynne's secret. His goodness and straightforward manner is symbolized by his plain way of talking.

Lady Margaret Windermere

Margaret is a beautiful, intelligent, and honorable woman who nearly leaves her husband because of a vicious rumor. At first, she rebuffs Lord Darlington's advances and believes that her husband is not having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne. However, she prepares to leave her husband when it appears that the gossip about her husband's relationship with Mrs. Erlynne is true.

Themes

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy can be defined as pretending to be something one is not or feigning to believe in something one does not. Most of the characters in Wilde's play accept hypocrisy as a necessary component of their social world. People in high society must pretend, must conform to the social norm in order to maintain their position. Hypocrisy is the glue that holds together a complex web of relationships; if the truth were to come out, these relationships would fall apart.

Lies are a necessary tool to avoid conflict. For example, Dumby agrees with Mrs. Stutfield that the season has been "delightful," and in the next breath agrees with the Duchess of Berwick that it has been "dreadfully dull." Likewise, the Duchess of Berwick tells Lady Windermere that her nieces never gossip, then later declares that they always gossip.

Hypocrisy is distinguished from virtuous lies, which are told to protect someone else. To ease the comfort of others even though this might require lying was part of the upper class code of conduct. Encouraged by Tuppy's remark that women with a past are "demmed interesting to talk to," Lord Windermere withholds the truth of Mrs. Erlynne's past in order to protect his friend from a truth that would ruin his marriage plans.

Mrs. Erlynne rises above hypocrisy when she sacrifices her own reputation for her daughter's. Although she has lived a life of hypocrisy, and she is desperately trying to get back into the society that once rejected her, she throws it away out of love.

The Bad Mother

The role of women was changing in Victorian society. Women were seeking greater independence, and they were entering the workforce in increasing numbers. The suffragist movement attracted many supporters, as women petitioned for the rights to vote and to own property (any money or property of the wife belonged to her husband upon marriage).

This greater independence for women was opposed on all fronts: politically, socially, and culturally. Soon, the independent woman was being portrayed as a bad wife and a bad mother.

Many plays, stories, poems, and articles featured the image of the "bad mother": the woman who abandons her children to pursue some selfish interest, such as a love affair or career. Such entrepreneurial social behavior was portrayed as dangerous and threatening to society in general.

Wilde's play is unusual for its time in allowing the "bad mother," Mrs. Erlynne, to make peace with her daughter (although without recognition of her motherhood) and to pursue her own life.

Style

Screen Scene

A screen scene is a scene in which an actor hides behind a drape or furniture and overhears the other actors. Melodrama, with its emphasis on secrets and their revelation, often makes use of the screen scene to allow a character to discover a secret. This discovery is a turning point in the plot.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan,* Lady Windermere's eavesdropping convinces her of her husband's fidelity. Also Mrs. Erlynne's sacrifice of her own reputation convinces her of the older woman's virtue.

Part of the purpose of the screen scene is to allow a character to discover information he or she is not supposed to hear. At the same time, the risk of being discovered in the act of eavesdropping adds to the dramatic intensity of the scene.

Further adding to the dramatic intensity, the play often has the eavesdropper leave something behind in the room. The other characters see and recognize a glove, a fan, or other personal item. Only a clever diversion such as that undertaken by Mrs. Erlynne can prevent the eavesdropper from exposure.

Comedy of Manners

During the Restoration period (1660-1699), fashionable audiences flocked to comedies that poked fun at the foibles and witticisms of high society. Pompous characters were held up for ridicule as they indulged in the misbehaviors and pretensions of the sophisticated set.

During the Victorian era, more serious plays came into style. Therefore, Wilde's comedy of manners was a refreshing change of style that revitalized comedy and set the stage for modern comic theatre.

Historical Context

Aestheticism Movement

The late nineteenth century "art-for-art's-sake" movement was promulgated by Walter Pater (1839-1894), an Oxford don who tutored Oscar Wilde. Wilde became a living example of his teacher's theory, which placed style and beauty above moral and social responsibility. Wilde's adherence to this theory earned him the name "The Great Aesthete."

According to Pater, the aesthete appreciated beautiful things and beautiful literature. Interest in art was facilitated by the rise in leisure time for the upper and middle class. The middle class adopted the values of the upper class and viewed the appreciation of art as part of their social training.

The aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelite movements opposed the Victorian obsession with industry, engineering, and efficiency. When Oscar Wilde declared to customs officials in America that "I have nothing to declare but my genius," he alluded to the refinement of character that he nurtured for its own sake.

Wilde surrounded himself with art and sought to exemplify Walter Pater's concept of the true critic, one with "a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects." Pater looked to the Renaissance era for a model of obsession with style.

Aesthetics valued the completely innocent person, such as the character Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Gray was both pure and physically beautiful until corrupted by an older man.

Lady Windermere is another beautiful and simple character with a natural ability to appreciate art and true sentiment.

Victorian Society

Three years before Oscar Wilde's birth, England celebrated the triumphs of industry in The Great Exhibition of 1851, which was housed in the magnificent Crystal Palace. Inside, observers viewed the highest technical achievement of every nation, and England's contributions put her in the forefront of scientific achievement.

The exhibition demonstrated the benefits of progress. England was at the height of prosperity, with income increasing exponentially through the efficiencies of industrialization. With a growing economy, a burgeoning middle class began to aspire to the fashions and habits of high society.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the newly affluent class was beginning to shoulder its way into formerly forbidden regions in politics, clubs, and the workplace.

It was also a time of budding feminism, as women took more and more aggressive steps to win suffrage. In the magazine he edited for two years, *The Women's World,* Wilde ran articles by women on both sides of the women's suffrage issue. Wilde had also changed the title from *The Lady's World* out of respect for the blurring lines between social classes.

Critical Overview

Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* garnered much popular and critical controversy on its debut at the St. James Theatre in February 20, 1892. The audience was filled to capacity with the literary stars of the time: Frank Harris, Henry James, actress Lillie Langtry, and a host of critics.

However, according to Vyvyan Holland in the introduction *toThe Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* Wilde caused a furor of resentment when he came onto the stage with a cigarette in his gloved hand and his signature green carnation in his lapel and told the audience,

Ladies and *Gentlemen*. I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given us a charming rendition of a *delightful play,* and your appreciation has been *most* intelligent*. I* congratulate you on the *great* success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do.

The reviews the next morning focused on the playwright's impertinence. Beckson states that Clement Scott accused Wilde of "condescension" and trying to "take greater liberties with the public than any author who ha[d] ever preceded [him] in history."

In an interview, Wilde took full responsibility for deviating from the expected humility of the author: "I have altered all that. The artist cannot be degraded into the servant of the public: humility is for the hypocrite, modesty for the incompetent. Assertion is at once the duty and the privilege of the artist."

The play ran for five months, then made a tour of the provinces and returned to London for another successful run. Although Henry James called the performance "infantine . . . both in subject and form," George Bernard Shaw, who had not yet made his name in theater, admired it.

Beckson declares that A. B. Walkley maintained that the "plot is always thin," that it is "full of... glaring faults" but was nevertheless a "good" play. Those who enjoyed the plethora of witty epigrams compared Wilde to Congreve and Sheridan, even though, in Wilde's play, "all the men talk like Mr. Oscar Wilde."

The play was produced a year later in New York City by Maurice Barrymore, but Wilde was not happy with the production because Lord Darlington was presented as a villain not as a person intent on saving Lady Windermere from an unfaithful husband. The New York production ran for several successful months.

More recent critics have explored gender issues relating to Wilde's homosexuality. Only recently Wilde's plays have been treated as separate from his personal life.

The deconstructionist view (of the 1970s and 1980s) perceived an inversion of the Victorian melodramatic conventions. Others have focused on the possible influences on his work.

Lady Windermere's Fan, with its somewhat outdated concern for the errant mother and its staging requirements (actors capable of sophisticated social banter and elaborate costumes and sets), is not often produced today. It is viewed as a period piece.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Gary Academy, an innovative private school in Gary, North Carolina. In the following essay, Hamilton explores how the wit in Lady Windermere's Fan *contributes to the structure and meaning of the plot, while also investing the play with a satirical jab at high society.*

True to the legacy of the Irish raconteur, Oscar Wilde was a master of wit, famous for clever conversation peppered with epigrams. With his rolling, mellifluous voice, he was the center of attention at social gatherings, and is still considered one of the greatest conversationalists of his time.

Lady Windermere's Fan, his first play, was expected to follow on the heels of the success of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and it certainly did.

However, many critics, such as a reviewer at the *Westminster Review,* objected to the number of epigrams in the play. These critics complained that wit so overshadows plot in *Lady Windermere's Fan* that the result is "scarcely a play at all" and that the characters do little more than "serve as mouths to enunciate the author's exquisitely funny remarks on society."

Another critic called Wilde the prophet of "great God Paradox," and maintained that "Mr. Wilde's puppets chant his litany" in a dramatic world where all its inhabitants are "equally cynical, equally paradoxical, equally epigrammatic."

This condemnation troubled Wilde, who wanted his work to be dramatically fresh and interesting and also psychologically true to life. He openly paraded his genius at conversation, but he also held greater ambitions for his plays than as mere platforms for his wit.

In response to the criticism that his play was superficial, he snidely pronounced the opinion of the British public not "of the slightest importance." They did not understand the depth of the final act, even though he considered it to be deeply "psychological " and "the newest, most true" moment of the play.

In the summation he wrote while at the nadir of his literary life and career in prison and rejected by even his closest friends he expressed confidence in his plays, and wrote that he had successfully produced "comedies that were to beat Congreve for brilliancy and Dumas fils for philosophy, and I suppose everyone else for every other quality."

Even Wilde himself failed to notice that not only was *Lady Windermere's Fan* a unique combination of brilliant dialogue and philosophical depth, but that he organized the plot through the syntactic structure of wit. He does this through the structure of the paradoxical epigram, which is a statement that contains two opposing ideas in a balance.

The plot elements are a balanced structure of opposing elements, as though Wilde used the pattern to compose his plot as he did to compose his witty sayings.

Epigrams are pithy sayings that compress two antithetical ideas into one polished sentence. The best epigrams contain concise language that presents two antithetical ideas in a mirror-image format. For example, in *Lady Windermere 's Fan,* Cecil Graham exclaims, "whenever people agree with me, I always feel I must be wrong."

Here the antithetical ideas are Cecil's opinions versus what people think of his opinions. Graham is saying that when his ideas meet with universal approval, he, paradoxically, decides to disagree with the majority and disavow his own idea. Underlying his statement is a satire of the people whose opinions Graham so disrespects that their very agreement with him changes his mind.

Almost every character in Wilde's plays and other works occasionally speak in epigrams. Wilde does not simply throw them in to display his own cleverness, but uses them to convey character and mood, and even to structure the plot itself.

The most simplistic of these is to establish character. The characters who use epigrams the most are Cecil Graham, Dunby, Lord Darlington, and Mrs. Erlynne. These characters are shown to be clever and haughty through their use of epigram.

For example, Lord Darlington and Cecil Graham banter about the contrast between a cynic (one who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing) and the sentimentalist (who sees an absurd value in everything and doesn't know the market price of any single thing). Their definitions are humorous and cynical, establishing them as part of the "smart" or sophisticated set.

Lord Darlington's comment that "so many conceited people go about society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad" also establishes him as a "smart" character, who finds it entertaining to be "bad." His epigrams led at least one director to fail to see Lord Darlington's sympathetic side.

In the 1893 New York production, Maurice Barrymore cast Lord Darlington as a villain. Wilde objected, saying, "Darlington is not a villain, but a man who really believes that Windermere is treating his wife badly, and wishes to save her." In this case, the character's witticisms caused him to be typecast.

On the other hand, not speaking in epigrams is a marker of sincerity. One clue that Lord Windermere is virtuous is that he never speaks paradoxically. His comments are straightforward and genuine.

His counterpart, Lord Darlington, is not always so sincere. Darlington's style changes from being cynical to being sincere symbolized by going from epigrammatic speech to more prosaic speech.

In the first scene, he appears as a dandy, with his blithe, epigrammatic sayings and suave compliments. Only when he begins to woo Lady Winder-mere in earnest does he drop the mask of cleverness and speak in a relatively straightforward manner.

However, his move toward sincerity is gradual. In the midway point, he uses the antithetical format, as when he suggests that "between man and woman there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship but no friendship."

In this phrase he still maintains the formal distance of the clever dandy wooing with words. When he drops even the antitheses, he is at his most sincere, simply telling Lady Windermere that he loves her. At this moment, the audience's estimation of Lord Darlington increases.

Contrasted to Darlington's development is Lady Windermere's descent into paradox. She begins in earnest, telling Lord Darlington that she is a Puritan for her beliefs that rules must be hard and fast. Just as her in beliefs, her speech does not tolerate the ambiguity of paradox.

Yet the moment when she begins to distrust her husband, she begins to speak in paradox; she tells Lord Windermere, "You are jealous of Mrs. Erlynne's honor. I wish you had been as jealous of mine." Though she still views her world in black and white, she now pairs her phrases in the form of the epigram, with antithetical elements at odds in the same way she sees her husband's attention to Mrs. Erlynne at odds with his duty to her.

She proceeds to duel in verbal paradoxes with her husband, and when she leaves him, she justifies her actions with another paradox, "He broke the bonds I only break the bondage." Ironically she is wrong about his having broken the bonds, and it will take another reversal on her part not to break the bonds herself.

Later, her conversation with Mrs. Erlynne is not epigrammatic, but intense and heartfelt; this conversation saves her. Then, as though she needs one last moment of darkness to appreciate her happiness, she indulges in a few more paradoxes while waiting for her husband's return: "What a pity that in life we only get our lessons when they are of no use to us!"

She drops this mode of thought once she feels assured of her husband's affections. Speaking in epigrams indicates a character is angry, or cynical, or insincere. It is as though the epigram speaker judges things from the safe distance of the uninvolved.

Wilde uses wit to reveal a character's internal state of mind in other ways, too. Mrs. Erlynne's comment on the London fog ("whether the fogs produce the serious people or whether the serious people produce the fogs, I don't know") at the end of the play reveals that Mrs. Erlynne has regained her confidence after the fiasco of the evening before, when she sacrificed her own reputation by stepping out from behind the curtain as a diversion so allow Lady Windermere to slip away undetected.

Her comment about the fog and seriousness not only shows her in witty form, but also contains her excuse for leaving town it is too cold, both literally and metaphorically, in terms of her reception in society. In other cases, witty paradoxes comprise "epigrammatic duels" between characters.

These occur between Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere, between Lady Windermere and her husband, Lord Windermere, and, finally, between Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere. In each case, the exchange ends in a barb aimed at the first speaker, whose character is called into question.

For example, Lord Windermere exclaims to Lady Windermere, "How hard good women are!" and she retorts, "How weak bad men are!" But besides being a verbal clue to their moods, the very syntax of the statements provides a pattern for reading their relationship. An extreme misunderstanding threatens the couple's relationship: they are at polar odds.

Moreover, Lady Windermere's comment is ironically inaccurate, in that Lord Windermere is not being weak, but strong and is not bad, but good. This dramatic inversion is the basis of dramatic irony that underpins the whole play.

Lady Windermere's Fan is about people who misunderstand or mistrust each other, whose opinions and trust lie at polar opposites, and who must maintain equipoise in the balance of a society that does not easily allow these differences to be aired.

Cecil Graham, an ancillary character whose only apparent purpose is to exemplify the generalized nature of male hypocrisy, proffers a clever definition of scandal, as "gossip made tedious by morality." Here the paradoxical statement contributes to the play's theme by voicing a criticism of a society that makes it difficult for people to trust and be trusted.

The message is presented by one of the most cynical characters in the play. This instance of an ironic paradox that seems like a toss-away comment is really one more perspective on the society the play satirizes.

Epigrammic speaking is "unnatural" in the sense that it sets up antithetical statements that seem not able to coexist (but do). The structure is comforting because of its symmetry; and disturbing, because of the internal tension between its elements.

In the same way, a character who reverses his or her opinions causes discomfort. The Duchess of Berwick at one moment proclaims her curiosity and pleasure in Australia and its darling kangaroos until her daughter gets engaged to an Australian. Then she announces that she has no intention of letting her daughter go to that "vulgar" place with "horrid kangaroos." Her character reversal is a "character paradox," a signal of an insincere and untrustworthy character.

The syntax of character paradox is the same pattern as the epigram: antithetical ideas in balance causing tension. The character paradox makes one wary, because it cannot be predicted whether the character will reverse again.

The pattern of the paradox is repeated in the plot as well. Wilde's play contains a series of internal plot paradoxes, in a kind of nested box structure. Lady Windermere thinks of life as a sacrament, and discovers that her husband has betrayed that belief, but she is really wrong a paradox.

Her response to betray him is an ironic dramatic reversal, another paradox. That she might do so with a man she doesn't even love is a reversal of character, because she had professed the values of the Puritan, who considers life a sacrament.

Another paradox lies in the fact that she is brought to her senses by the very woman who had betrayed her as a child. Being saved by the one who abandoned her is a reversal, or paradoxical pattern.

Mrs. Erlynne's status is also a grand reversal. She begins as a social outcast desperate for acceptance into society, and ends as one who leaves it willingly.

Furthermore, her second "abandonment" of her daughter is a boon, not a betrayal. The audience, too, undergoes a reversal in its opinion of Mrs. Erlynne. The paradox is a pattern that organizes not only the witticism, but also the plot and the characters. The epigrams are not extraneous, but integral to a full comprehension of the play.

Perhaps Wilde's natural penchant for epigrammatic speaking was a habit so deep that it formulated the structure of his plays and stories, just as it formulated the witty sayings he produced in his brilliant conversation.

Source: Carole Hamilton for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Nasser argues that George Bernard Shaw modelled his Mrs. Warren on Wilde's Lady Windermere.

After *Lady Windermere's Fan* was first performed on 20 February 1892, Oscar Wilde found himself a famous playwright. At the time, George Bernard Shaw was struggling to establish himself on the British stage after having failed as a novelist. *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* his third play, was written in late 1893 and early 1894. Shaw's play is a Shavian reworking of Wilde's, an attempt to squarely face the issues that Wilde sidestepped. In a nutshell, it is *Lady Windermere's Fan* intellectualized.

The situations of the two plays are remarkably similar, both built around confrontation between a bad mother and an innocent daughter. In both plays, the mother lives on the Continent and the daughter in England, and in both the daughter knows little about her mother and indeed harbors illusions about her. Both daughters confront the danger of becoming like their mothers, and both withdraw from the precipice after a brief period of confusion. In both plays, society is presented as corrupt, and morally innocent individuals are out of place.

In Wilde's play, after leaving her husband and daughter, Mrs. Erlynne spends 20 years on the Continent with no visible means of support except her good looks. Lord Windermere calls her "a divorced woman, going about under an assumed name, a bad woman preying upon life" (act 4,458). We are never told how she lived, but the assumption is that she seduced rich men like Lord Augustus and took their money. Certainly, she is presented as an accomplished seductress in the play, but Wilde bows to Victorian morality and leaves this aspect of her life obscure. A question forms in the reader's or viewer's mind: What did Mrs. Erlynne do during her 20 years on the Continent? Shaw picks up the question and answers it mercilessly in the figure of Mrs. Warren, who also uses an assumed name Miss Vavasour. Shaw bluntly unmasks Mrs. Warren as a prostitute who made a fortune in her profession.

Maupassant's tale *Yvette* andPinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* are often cited as sources of Shaw's play, and rightly so, but the chief and hitherto unrecognized source is *Lady Windermere 's Fan.* Toward the end of 1893 Wilde was taking the London stage by storm (his second social comedy, *A Woman of No Importance,* was first produced on 19 April 1893, and was also successful); the struggling Shaw must have felt a tinge of envy. The suspicion of envy is reinforced by Shaw's negative review of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895 and his attempt some years later to re-create Lady Brae knell in the figure of Lady Britomart, Major Barbara's mother. His reaction, then, in 1893-94 was to attempt to remold *Lady Windermere's Fan* along Shavian lines.

There are many parallels and counterpoints between Lady Windermere and Vivie Warren. At the beginning of their respective plays, both women are innocents with a corrupt mother in the background whose corruption they are unaware of, and both have a strict set of morals. Lady Windermere's values, however, are presented as too rigid,

and as the play unfolds she becomes more lenient and forgiving. Vivie moves in the same direction, and by the end of act 2 she has forgiven her mother and accepted her as a persecuted woman who defeated terrible poverty in the only manner open to her. But Vivie soon realizes that her mother was wrong, reasserts her own values, and prefers isolation and poverty to Mrs. Warren's tainted money. By the end of the play, Vivie is if anything more puritanical than at the beginning. Nor does Lady Windermere ever realize how corrupt her society is, whereas Vivie comes to realize "that fashionable morality is all a pretence" (act 4, 57) in capitalist Britain.

Finally, in both plays, society as a whole is presented as corrupt. "I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal" (act 1, 424), asserts Lady Windermere, but when we meet her guests, it is clear that they are all immoral, from Cecil Graham, to Dumby, to Lady Plymdale and the others.

Whereas *Lady Windermere's Fan* defines morality in primarily sexual terms, in Mrs. *Warren's Profession* sexual corruption is part of the economic corruption that permeates every corner of British society and that only Fabian socialism can uproot. Money is a concern in both plays, but Wilde never questions the origins of Lord Windermere's or anybody else's fortune, whereas Shaw makes the origin of all fortunes his chief concern.

Given all these similarities and counterpoints between the two plays, then, it is fair to assert that Shaw's play is a direct response to Wilde's.

Source: Christopher Nasser, "Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession,*" in Explicator, Spring, 1998, Vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 137-38.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Nasser suggests that Wilde reworks the four stages of Dorian Gray's life by embodying them in the four main characters of Lady Windermere's Fan, *but this reworking is set within the framework and atmosphere of social comedy.*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Dorian develops from childlike innocence to a state of serious depravity in four states. The first stage is when he is still twenty and posing for Basil Hallward. Here he is the innocent young man who has not yet come in contact with evil. The second is when he is in love with Sibyl Vane. At this state evil has entered his life, but he is still largely innocent. The third is what might be called the "limited corruption" stage. Basil and Wotton become the opposing forces within him. Although he clearly leans toward Wotton, he is still balanced between good and evil, for his conscience is still alive and there are certain crimes, such as deliberate murder, that he would shrink from committing. In the fourth stage, all control is lost. He murders Basil, then tries to kill his conscience, which he identifies with his picture. Instead, he himself dies: human nature is "gray" and no one can become completely evil.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Dorian Gray is fragmented and reincarnated in the four main characters, each of whom embodies one of the aforementioned stages, but within the framework and atmosphere of social comedy. Wilde often based his works on earlier works of his. In *Dorian Gray,* Dorian's development mirrors the drift of Victorian life and art toward corruption. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, this same drift is shown in the juxtapositon of the four main characters, but it is simultaneously obscured by being cast in the mold of social comedy.

Dorian's first stage, childlike innocence, is embodied in Lord Windermere. Although he exists in a corrupt late-Victorian environment, Windermere is wrapped in a cocoon of early-Victorian morality that is never penetrated by his immoral surroundings. He is the object of much slander in the play, and even his wife becomes convinced that he is having an affair with Mrs. Erlynne. But he remains moral from beginning to end. His interest is in "saving" Mrs. Erlynne and in protecting his wife.

The art he admires is also that of spiritual innocence and purity. In act 4, he attacks Mrs. Erlynne for having drifted away from a miniature of herself that his wife "kisses every night before she prays. It's the miniature of a young innocent-looking girl with beautiful *dark* hair." This miniature typifies the kind of art that D. G. Rossetti produced in the 1850s and that Basil Hallward created in the picture of Dorian before it began to change. The Victorians have drifted away from such art, however, toward Pater's *Mona Lisa,* decadence, and Dorian's picture after its corruption. But Windermere has not developed with the age. He remains frozen at the state of purity and innocence.

In Lady Windermere we see the second stage of Dorian's development, which began when he fell in love with Sibyl Vane and ended when he rejected her and she committed suicide. Dorian's picture registers the change in him by adding lines of cruelty around the mouth, but it remains otherwise unaltered.

When we meet Lady Windermere, she is still pure and innocent, but during the play she rejects her husband, decides to become Lord Darlington's lover, then draws back from this immoral decision and with the help of Mrs. Erlynne is able to return to her previous life and preserve her marriage. It is significant that as soon as she steps into the world of corruption she is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and decides to withdraw: "No, no! I will go back, let Arthur do as he pleases. I can't wait here. It has been madness my coming. I must go at once." Mrs. Erlynne's role is to open the trap and allow her daughter to slip away.

This episode changes Lady Windermere irrevocably. She becomes aware of an immoral streak in herself and as a consequence becomes more forgiving and stops categorizing people as good or evil. At the end of the play, she is tainted but still basically pure, much like Dorian's picture after the suicide of Sibyl Vane. Her sense of guilt parallels Dorian's after Sibyl's death. And like Dorian, she hides her secret from the world.

In his recent biography of Oscar Wilde [entitled *Oscar Wilde]*, Richard Ellman observed of Lord Darlington:

Lord Darlington, who has been taken as a man about town, and who talks like Lord Henry Wotton, differs from Wotton in his possession of deep feelings.... When the play was given in New York with Maurice Barrymore ... in the role, Wilde complained that Barrymore had failed to see that "Darlington is *not* a villain, but a man who really believes that Windermere is treating his wife badly, and wishes to save her. His appeal is not to the weakness, but to the strength of her character (Act II): in Act III his words show he really loves her." It is because of her that he is leaving England for many years; he is a better man than Windermere.

Darlington may not be a better man than Windermere, but there is more goodness in him than people have generally recognized. He sums up the third stage in Dorian's development, and there is within him a very delicate balance between goodness and corruption. The two opposites struggle in Darlington throughout the play, and the battle is not resolved at its end.

As the play begins, Darlington is in love with Lady Windermere, a married woman, and wants her for his mistress. But his great paradox is that he loves Lady Windermere for her purity and innocence: through her, he wants to recapture his own lost innocence. He says of her: "She is a good woman. She is the only good woman I have ever met in my life." And: "This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost." The moral situation of Darlington is captured in act 3, when he says to Cecil Graham and Dumby, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

But Darlington's problem is that he cannot recover his lost innocence through Lady Windermere. She is already married, and if he wins her, he will only be dragging her into the gutter and corrupting her. Definitely not a fool, he realizes the impossibility of his situation but corruptly continues to pursue her. And yet part of the reason he appeals to her to leave her husband in act 2 and to go with him is quite moral: he is thoroughly convinced that Windermere is a monstrously corrupt man who does not deserve her for

a wife. Darlington's motives are a very complex and fascinating fusion of goodness and corruption, for black and white are mixed inextricably in him.

His final decision to leave England is ambiguous: he leaves as much for Lady Windermere's sake as for his own. It is true he decides to leave after her apparent rejection of him, but it is also true that she is at her most vulnerable at the end of act 2 and that his chances with her have never been better. Indeed, that same night she reverses her decision and goes to his rooms. His hasty departure is both selfish and self-sacrificial. At least in part, he leaves because his stormy conversation with her leads him to realize how painful social disgrace would be for her. On the other hand, he does not want her to come to him mournfully, in tears, but with a smile and courageously or not at all. Even Lord Darlington's name is ambiguous, marking him both as a dandy and a "darling."

Mrs. Erlynne represents the final stage in Dorian's development. Although she does not commit any action quite as drastic as murder, she is nonetheless an immoral woman, devoted to leading a life of pleasure. In the play she discovers the goodness in herself and makes a major sacrifice to save her daughter. But she discovers that motherly love is too exhausting and strange an emotion for her, and she returns to the life of pleasure. She declares to the shocked Windermere: "I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible they made me suffer they made me suffer too much." And: "No what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure" (act 4). Far from being the conventional fallen woman of Victorian melodrama, Mrs. Erlynne deliberately rejects the goodness in herself and returns to a life of corruption. As Ellmann has observed, " *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a more radical play than it appears.... Wilde ... shelves the stereotype of the fallen woman: Mrs. Erlynne is singularly impenitent." Wilde regarded this point as so basic that he wrote, in one of his letters, that her character is "as yet untouched by literature."

Mrs. Erlynne's rejection of motherly love parallels Dorian's attempt to destroy his conscience by stabbing his picture. Far from dying, however, she tricks the infatuated Lord Augustus into marrying her and travels with him to the Continent. She also retains an affection for her daughter, albeit from a distance: human nature being "gray," the goodness in Mrs. Erlynne cannot be eliminated.

In The *Critic as Artist,* Wilde wrote:

To an artist as creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives elsewhere. Treatment is the test.... [Criticism] works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry?

Treatment, then, or form, is what is vital in all art, not subject matter. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde applied this principle quite successfully. He took the raw subject matter of his novel and gave it a new form. The result was his first successful play.

Source: Christopher Nasser, "Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*," in *Explicator*, Fall, 1995, Vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 20-24.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Jacobs examines Wilde's use of fantasy in exploring the question of cultural identity.

Though fantasy has been dismissed by many academics as a genre of marginal literary value, it attracts artists as well as readers. Indeed, one reason why a consensual definition of literary fantasy eludes us is that authors working in many genres draw upon it, smudging generic boundaries. Oscar Wilde was one of these writers.

Wilde appreciated the mind's power to make its own meanings, and he was skeptical of epistemologies, including his own. He used fantastic techniques, particularly those underscoring epis-temological questions, although for him problems of knowing the phenomenological world were less interesting than problems of understanding a literary text. Given the complex, irrational subjectivities of authors and readers, he argued, no literary work could be perfectly understood. Moreover, the ultimate inability of a reader to perceive an author's exact meaning represented opportunities for both in expression and aesthetic pleasure. Wilde pursued such opportunities even in such seemingly conventional forms as the plays that made his fortune, temporarily, in the first half of the 1890s.

This discussion covers some of those plays. Often called Wilde's comedies, they actually conform to conventions of the "well-made play" (sometimes called "society" drama) and a related type, the problem play. The typical well-made play involved the inexorable disclosure of secrets. The problem play, in the hands of an Ibsen, could be made to challenge the status quo; in it, a character facing a moral dilemma would examine his or her heart, which may have been obscured by a life spent subservient to social convention. Wilde's imagination responded to the most conventional elements of these types of plays, particularly their sentimentalization of human nature while formally and ideologically suppressing it.

A discussion of the uses Oscar Wilde made of fantasy in these plays should clarify the differences between fantasy and any genre that is its host, yet critics disagree on fantasy's definition. Fantasy is metamorphic. Like literature in general, it takes on issues and symbols that matter most to an author and her culture, so that many descriptions and prescriptions of fantasy are contaminated by ethnocentricity. Traditionally, fantasy has been defined, as it is in Holman and Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature,* as a genre whose stories contradict reality by describing impossible events, creatures, and places. Such a definition does address what most readers intuit is fundamental to fantasy literature, yet "reality," either as a word or concept, is an unstable criterion. Our understanding of the world is influenced by our education, our experience, and the religious and scientific axioms of our particular culture or society. Some critics concur with Jean-Paul Sartre [in "*Aminadab,* or the Fantastic Considered as a Language,"] that magic and otherworldy settings are not essential to fantasy:

So long as it was thought possible to escape the conditions of human existence through ascesticism, mysticism, metaphysical disciplines or the practice of poetry, fantasy was called upon to fulfill a very definite function. It manifested our human power to transcend the human.... After the long metaphysical holiday of the post-war period, which ended in disaster, the new generation of artists and writers ... had returned, with much ado, to the human. This tendency had an effect on fantasy itself... [which] in order to find a place within the humanism of our time ... is going to become domesticated, will give up the exploration of transcendental reality and resign itself to transcribing the human condition.

Rosemary Jackson and Leo Bersani are among those to offer psychological, structural, and formal examination of nontranscendental fantasy.

Some critics and writers of fantasy regard it as a disruption of, or conflict between, rhetorical structures. For instance, Eric Rabkin describes fantasy as a text that introduces, then contradicts, ground rules governing how the reader interprets the fictional world. Drawing on Huizinga's theory of play, W.R. Irwin defines a fantastic "world" as a place designated by a rigid set of rules and distinguished from those defining the reader's culture. The focus of recent critics like these on the rule-making mind allows us to explore the operations of fantasy even where there is no magic or bizarre other world, as in Wilde's comedies.

Lady Windermere's Fan, produced in 1891, made Wilde's fortune and enhanced his reputation. It is the story of a woman's encounter with the mother who had abandoned her. Lady Windermere' s mother has come back, calling herself Mrs. Erlynne and blackmailing the husband, Lord Windermere, who wishes to spare his wife the truth about her mother. Believing that the two are having an affair, the angry Lady Windermere resolves to elope with an admirer, Lord Darlington. Mrs. Erlynne discovers her daughter's plan, follows her to Darlington's empty apartment, and convinces her to return home. Before they can leave, Darlington enters with his friends, including Lord Windermere and Lord Augustus, Mrs. Erlynne's suitor. The women hide, but Lady Windermere leaves her fan behind. When the fan is discovered, Mrs. Erlynne comes out of hiding, allowing everyone to assume she has come to Darlington for an assignation, and explains that she had taken it by mistake. Wilde undermines the impact on the audience of this sacrifice when she mollifies the resentful Lord Augustus the next day. She and her "protector" depart for Paris without revealing her identity to her grateful daughter.

Though this plot contradicts certain cliches, it does not disorient us or contradict the world view of any but the most authoritarian and rigorous of puritans, and so it is not in itself fantastic. In fact, the plot enacts an assumption conventional to both the problem play and the well-made play, that human beings have an essence, an identity, often concealed behind social masks. To uncover this essence, the plot delivers Mrs. Erlynne's moment of maternal protectiveness, supported by some of the stage directions: "For a moment she reveals herself' and "Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh." The woman, uncovered, is loving, distressed by her alienation from the human

community but brave enough to resist a temptation to claim a love that would cause the beloved pain.

If we look more closely at Mrs. Erlynne and some of the other characters, however, we find that their identities may not have been uncovered after all. Lady Windermere, the one character on stage who comes to see Mrs. Erlynne as good, is untrustworthy. As Morse Peckham has observed [in "What Did Lady Windermere Learn"], Lady Windermere's change of heart is superficial: "She is one of those who cannot tell the difference between ideals and illusions ... and she is therefore incapable of true moral growth." Moving Mrs. Erlynne over into the category of goodness does not change Lady Windermere's puritanical division of people into good and bad. She merely excuses Mrs. Erlynne's past, rather than confront and understand it. This morally immature character, kept in the dark to the last on the grounds that she does not have the temperament for truth, brings the play's very axioms into question, since the only character to unmask an identity does so in the unexamined, narrow terms of her idealistic culture. Wilde does not emphasize this irony, and so many spectators simply understand the play's conclusion as further manifestation of Mrs. Erlynne's generosity. Yet the coexistence of ironic and traditional structures examining identity, or character, creates an epistemo-logical ambiguity common in fantasy, for neither human nature nor the nature of the play can be decided.

Mrs. Erlynne's comments further undermine the traditional epistemology of this kind of play. Rejecting the characterization of her that the plot has been making, she cavalierly denies that the moment when she nearly sacrifices herself to save her daughter defines her: "I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and my heart doesn't suit me, Windermere." We can read "my heart doesn't suit me" as a pathetic cynicism, a protest against the pain that comes with living, but "my heart doesn't suit me" has another implication. Though she does not regret saving her daughter (partly because she does not suffer materially), she is openly repelled by her spontaneous gesture, which, ironically, threatens to encapsulate her inside an identity. "I want to live childless still," she cries, denying the power of physical fact to force an identity on her. What she did was an emotional impulse, and impulses, she insists, do not necessarily define oneself.

The lack of identity that Mrs. Erlynne preserves is, like her childlessness, an emptiness that is filled incessantly by experimental play. That is, she is a fantasist, responding to the lack implied in the ideal Victorian identity by creating a character for herself the audience would consider impossible, a woman who is all potential because she is without essence. Repeatedly she alludes to herself as a role-player. Gazing at a picture of herself as a young woman, she muses, "Dark hair and an innocent expression were the fashion then, Windermere!" To the spectator, experienced in the kinds of assumptions about human nature promulgated by this sort of play, that photograph is a memento of authenticity, lost when the ingenue entered a hypocritical, dangerous society. But Mrs. Erlynne only claims to see a frame and a pose. To her mind, frame and pose record her as accurately as she can be recorded, for she has no identity, only epochs. Mrs. Erlynne underscores the artificiality of theatrical conventions that purport to disclose the essence of human nature: "Oh, don't imagine that I am going to have a

pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing. I have no ambition to play the part of a mother." The crafty and witty demimondaine may be a mask, but so is the weeping, loving mother that the audience has been expecting to see emerge as the "real" Mrs. Erlynne.

Certainly the play encourages us to see Mrs. Erlynne as revealing a deeper, better self. Yet Mrs. Erlynne's refusal to be a Stella Dallas cannot be entirely dismissed as mere denial. Though in some ways pathetic, deprived of family and dependent economically on men, she is also creative. Hers are the metamorphoses we have seen in myth and fantasy; she makes herself an ingenue, a demimondaine, a powerful mother, and, yes, a Stella Dallas. What Leo Bersani says about "fantasy as a phenomenon of psychic deconstruction" [in *Baudelaire and Freud}* applies to Wilde as well: "he can be located at that critical moment in our culture's history when an idealistic view of the self and of the universe is being simultaneously held onto and discredited by a psychology (if the word still applies) of the fragmented and the discontinuous." Mrs. Erlynne's dramatic function in the play similarly deconstructs and nostalgically holds onto the culture's idealistic assumptions about identity.

Mechanisms of fantasy often operate through Wilde's epigrams, which can deny the play's premises by creating a bizarre world dominated by surface and style, not heart, or identity. In the Windermere world human nature is constrained by "an idealistic view of the self." Windermere language acknowledges only certain experiences and events, interpreting them only from certain (moral) perspectives. The spontaneous revelation of self that people believe they see in the Windermere world is thus a delusion. The heartlessness, in *The Importance of Being Earnest,* that Mary McCarthy complained of is here as well, but not in a moral sense. Heartlessness in the epigrammatic characters is an impersonal wit, with surface and style elevated, in fantasy's exaggerated way, in response to the Windermere idea of heart.

Wilde's contemporary A. B. Walkley noticed [in the Review of *Lady Windermere's Fan*} that the conversation of dandies in Darlington's rooms took place in a secondary world within the play. Action ceases during the scene, he reported, "but you do not notice its length, for it is a perpetual coruscation of epigrams. Just before the epigrams get boring, the action returns." When action freezes and epigrams take over, the epistemology gestured to by the framing play is replaced by another. The dandies form a community based on epigrams, their conversation a ritual during which they touch and acknowledge one another without learning anything about one another's personal histories or sentiments. There are two exceptions: Lord Darlington, whose love for Lady Windermere has suddenly made him open and earnest, and Lord Windermere, troubled by his blackmailing mother-in-law and furious wife. Neither man speaks or interacts with the other dandies.

An otherwise minor figure, Cecil Graham, underscores the difference between the ludic dandy world and the world of the play enclosing it. When the play is staged rather than read, Graham's importance is clear; besides generating the greatest number of epigrams, he takes up a great deal of space. Starting with the directions "Cecil Graham comes toward him laughing," Wilde sets the character off on peregrinations the

principals do not follow. He moves back and forth, lights a cigarette, puts a hand on another man's shoulder, and preens in front of the fireplace. The audience follows his movements, a choreographed display of meaninglessness, and listens to epigrams that reveal nothing about the man inside. During this time, the plot is suspended: Windermere sits thoughtfully, while Darlington writes letters, philosophizes to himself, and finally exits. Only Graham and his frivolous cohorts seem animate in the world that has suddenly come into being, where wit and style, but not heart, dominate. It is the restless Graham who finds the fan and turns it over to Windermere, who exclaims melodramatically over it. Thus the play is handed back to its principals and its principles. Graham moves away and grows still, smirking perhaps maliciously from the sidelines.

If Wilde had any reason for giving Graham the name of the friend who commits suicide in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," it is that both are alienated from the perspective that informs *Lady Windermere's Fan.* One Graham, the suicide, devotes himself to Shakespeare's poetry and to a theory that articulates stylishly the aesthetic merits of Shakespeare's presumed pederasty. The second, sunny-tempered Graham has an appreciation of comic style that replaces the preoccupations of the rest of the play. Spouting his silly epigrams, this Graham exalts a well-timed jest over moral earnestness and the search for a human essence. The scene at which he is the central figure is thus more than a collection of amusing epigrams: it is a fantastic world insubordinate to the culture's will to define identity, or heart.

At times, then, *Lady Windermere's Fan* contradicts all that the conventional plot encourages us to believe. The play's epistemology is undermined by the fantastic vision that, intruding into it, perceives its subjects from different angles, introduces different assumptions into the story, and in general subverts its structure and direction. The plot concerns a quest for identity, while other elements in the play suggest that identity, at least as it is imagined by the plot, neither exists nor matters. Only the audience's self-delusion, fostered by the more sentimental conventions within the play, can let it believe that at the end it has seen past the facades of the Windermeres and Mrs. Erlynne. . . .

Source: Susan Taylor Jacobs, "When Formula Seizes Form: Oscar Wilde's Comedies," in *Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Modern Drama,* edited by Patrick D. Murphy, Greenwood, 1992, pp. 15 29.

Adaptations

Lady Windemere 's Fan has been adapted in two silent films: a 1917 version by Ideal Film, and a 1925 Warner Brothers production called *The Fan* by director Ernest Lubitsch.

Otto Preminger remade *The Fan* with sound in 1949.

Librettist Don Allan Clayton adapted the play for an Off-Broadway musical comedy called A *Delightful Seaso*n in 1960.

A recording of the play exists in a 1997 audiotape version with Michael Sheen speaking the part of Lord Darlington.

Topics for Further Study

Explore and discuss the role of wit in *Lady Windemere's Fan*. Is it necessary to the play's meaning? Why or why not?

Is Mrs. Erlynne a "good woman?" Support your answer with evidence of her deeds and words.

Research the genre of "comedy of manners." What are the characteristics of such a play? Can you think of a recent play or movie in that genre?

Could such a situation as that in *Lady Windemere 's Fan* happen today? Write an essay describing what you would change to make the situation more modern.

Compare and Contrast

Victorian London: Industrialization leads to a migration from the country to towns and cities as thousands of workers toil in British factories.

Today: More and more workers are part of the "service" and high-tech economy as opposed to manufacturing and industry. It is more economical to build factories in Third World countries.

Victorian London: The railroad revolutionizes travel as well as the movement of raw materials and finished goods. The middle and working class could afford excursions to seaside resorts and to the towns and cities for entertainment.

Today: The Internet puts information and entertainment into the hands of a computer-literate society. From art and literature to stock trading and shopping, the Internet offers many options for its users. People gather in virtual chat rooms instead of drawing rooms, parlors, and music halls.

Victorian London: The mail is delivered up to three times per day in London. For those who could afford it, a message could be sent across town in the morning and a response received that evening.

Today: People can send messages instantaneously by phone, electronic mail, instant messaging, and teleconferencing.

What Do I Read Next?

Richard Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777) is a comedy of manners concerning a wife who nearly betrays her older husband.

Henrik Ibsen's A *Doll's House* (1879) depicts a mother who feels constrained and unhappy in her limited role. As a result, she leaves her husband and children.

Mrs. Warren's Profession (1898), written by George Bernard Shaw, views the theme of the wayward mother with marked parallels to Wilde'splay.

A play by Moises Kaufman about Wilde's trial for homosexuality, *Gross Indecencies: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* offers insights into Wilde and the social world of Victorian London.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Oscar Wilde,* Chelsea House, 1985,146 p.

An anthology of recent scholarship on Wilde, with a brief commentary by Bloom in which he concerns himself with the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom's term for a writer's struggle to create something fresh and new) in Wilde.

Coakley, Davis*. Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish, Town House, 1*995, 246 p.

Explores the role of the Irish raconteur in Wilde's family and in his social life.

Ellman, Richard. Oscar Wilde, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988,632 p.

The definitive Wilde biography.

Freedman, Jonathan*. Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice-Hall, 1995, 257 p.

Essays, brief biography, and selected bibliography.

Holland, Vyvyan Beresford*. Oscar Wilde: A Pictorial Biography,* Viking Press, 1960, 144 p.

An intimate biography written by Oscar Wilde's son.

Knox, Melissa. Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide, Yale University Press, 1994, 185 p.

A psychoanalytic biography that explore Wilde's childhood experiences and their effect on his later life.

McCormack, Jerusha, ed*. Wilde the Irishman,* Yale University Press, 1998, 205 p.

Essays on aspects of Wilde's works.

Powell, Kerry. *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s,* Cambridge University Press, 1990, 204 p.

Places Wilde into a literary and historical context.

Raby, Peter, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde,* Cambridge University Press, 1997, 307 p.

Examines the defining themes of Wilde's work.

Bibliography

Beckson, Karl, ed. *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1970,434 p.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde; with an introduction by Vyvyan Holland,* Harper & Row, 1989 (1966).

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535