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Social Criticism in Oscar Wilde's Comedies

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Prohlášení

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vlastnoruční podpis

Abstract

This bachelor thesis focuses on social criticism in Oscar Wilde's comedies. The thesis mentions Oscar Wilde's personal life, the aesthetic movement, general information about the Victorian period, the definition of social criticism and Wilde's connection with criticism. This thesis is dedicated to the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*. The analysis of the plays concentrates on the theme of marriage, moral principles, and representation of women in the Victorian era. The thesis also reveals Oscar Wilde's point of view of the society in the Victorian age and how his own experiences and opinions are connected with his works.

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Introduction

This thesis is focused on one of the greatest authors of all time, Oscar Wilde (1854 -1900) who was an Irish poet, playwright, author of the well-known novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and modern fairytales. He was a controversial figure during Victorian England and this thesis concentrates on criticism of society in two of his plays: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895).

The first part is dedicated to Wilde's personal life, providing information about his family and its influence on his personality, as well as some specific characteristics of Wilde's relatives.

There are mentioned his studies and success, which he obtained quite early during his lifetime. At this time Wilde was a member of the Aesthetic Movement, which led to his visit to the USA which is described in more details. There is information about his writings, but also information about an important moment in his life when Wilde was charged with homosexuality and the trial after that. This chapter also involves a deeper view on the Aesthetic movement, describing the origin of the movement and its values and priorities. The focus is also on the specific characteristics of a dandy, who is represented in many of Wilde's plays.

Then my thesis is concerned with Victorian England, which is the time when the plays take place and the time when the plays were written. It summarizes how Victorian England looked like and what was life like during the nineteenth century. There is information about the social class system which had a great influence on Wilde's writings and was one of the targets of his criticism. The everyday life of people, their values and priorities, activities and the big differences among social classes are mentioned. This chapter also mentions other writers of this period and their works.

The next chapter describes social criticism and its meaning because it is an important part of the analysis of the two plays. It explains how Oscar Wilde is connected to social criticism.

The main part of this thesis involves an analysis of Wilde's society plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*. The main focus is on social criticism which is apparent in those plays. He critiques society and the moral values of Victorians. The thesis focuses on three main themes which are: the theme of marriage, moral principles and the theme of women. Humorous moments are provided in Wilde's plays. These moments point out the imperfections of high-class society, the hypocrisy and the lust for being perfect.

1 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is a writer who is still read by many people world-wide. An Irishman from Dublin who was admired and celebrated during his time and even now. He was a playwright, poet, artist and as he called himself a professor of aestheticism. He is remembered for his wit, humour, intelligence and for the way he criticized society in the way like nobody before. His extraordinary life was full of excitement and humiliation. He was widely known in different parts of the world, but his life ended in a degrading way. His masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is popular among all kinds of people and is the most quoted play in the English language after *Hamlet*. (Lawson, 1995, online)

1.1 Personal life

Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October in 1854. He was a son of Jane Francesca Wilde (1821-1896), who was an Irish well-educated poet and folklorist and who published translations of French and some German works. She had an enormous influence on Wilde's sexuality as she treated him as a girl (Pearson, 1947, 26). She was dressing and treating him as a girl during his early childhood. She gave him her passion for beauty in literature, art and culture which had an obvious impact on his works. His father William Robert Wilde was a surgeon who focused on eye and ear. His books *Aural Surgery* (1853) and *Epidemic Ophthalmia* (1851) were first of their kind (Ellmann, 1988, 10). He studied abroad, he visited Vienna, Berlin and other places. As his success grew he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1873. Wilde had one older brother William Robert Kingsbury Wills Wilde (1852-1859) who was a poet and journalist and one younger sister Isola Francesca Emily Wilde (1852-1871). Wilde's family belonged to the middle-class. His family did not lack in friends and their house in the city was considered as one

of the best. Parties with many influential people were happening there. They included well-known musicians, government officials, actors, writers and university professors. All the children were well-educated and schooled at home, they were brought up to speak German and French.

Oscar Wilde entered prestige Portora Royal School, where he developed interests in Greek culture and aestheticism. Next school he visited was The Trinity College in Dublin where he studied Greek literature and then he continued to study classics at Magdalen College, Oxford. There he founded the Aesthetic movement. Wilde was an excellent student during his studies and won many prizes including the Oxford's Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna" (Pearson, 1947, 49). His literary career started in 1881 when he published his poems. During this time, he became quite well-known for participation in the aesthetic movement. He was influenced by John Ruskin's and Walter Pater's writings about art as a central part of life. He was a controversial figure during the Victorian period. The way he dressed and had his hair long was not very common during this period and he was attacked by many critiques. His unusual sense of beauty was shocking. He decorated his rooms with peacock feathers, poppies, lilies, sunflowers and blue china, which were part of his own identity and he implemented them into his works such as *An Ideal Husband* (1895). In 1879, Wilde started to teach about Aesthetics in London and later his success of Aesthetic movement resulted in lectures on the tour of the United States and Canada, which included cities like New York, Chicago, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia and others. On this tour he had many opportunities to meet many famous personalities. He met with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes or Walt Whitman. In America Wilde had enormous success and was viewed as a person with a glorious lifestyle and exciting personality and opinions. The way he looked was sympathetic to them and he enjoyed his popularity to its fullness. The next place he visited after America was Paris where he spent 3 months and was surrounded by French literary celebrities, like Victor Hugo or Emil Zola. (Pearson, 1947, 86-87)

In 1884 he met his wife Constance Lloyd who was a wealthy daughter of a British barrister and they had two children, Cyril and Vivian. She was also well-educated and spoke French and Italian fluently (Ellmann, 1988, 355). They lived in a big four floor house, which was highly decorated with various patterns, colours and different materials like Japanese leather or gold. He filled his house with delicate china, napkins with fringes, curtains, decorated ceiling, drawings by various authors and much more. The place was showing Oscar Wilde's personality from the outside (Ellmann, 1988, 256-257). This was the time when Wilde settled down for a while and wrote book reviews for newspapers and magazines and in 1887, he became an editor of the *Woman's World*. Two years later he left his position and started a career as a playwright which brought him glory again. At this time he wrote *Poems*, published a collection of modern fairytales *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), his only but very successful novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), society plays and other stories, *Intentions* (1891), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1887), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). In the later years, he wrote plays like *Salome* (1891), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893) and an essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891).

Wilde's plays were revolutionary. His plays were highly influenced by Victorian society. He brought up the topic of gender, women's role, sexuality and meanings of masculinity in his plays. Unfortunately, during his greatest success, he was arrested due to the charges of indecency. The topic of Wilde's sexuality was the subject of many discussions. When Constance was showed a photograph, which was taken at a party where she had not been present, with a proof of Wilde's homosexuality, her response was quite strange (Ellmann, 1988, 278). She was not jealous, but only sad. His attendance to brothels and frequent visits to homosexual bars were proved and used against him. The act of love between boys has been seen in one of Wilde's works *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* (1889). It was only a year after marriage with Constance that he was looking for a male companion. It was Robert Baldwin Ross and later Lord Alfred Douglas who influenced him. He did not deny the attraction to Lord Alfred Douglas which led Douglas's father Marquess of Queensberry to start a

trial against Wilde. Queensberry was not very popular among Victorian society, because of his many divorces and brutality which was associated with the boxing world where he belonged. He tried to confront Wilde several times but with no success. Queensberry even attempted to ruin the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* when he planned to throw a bouquet of turnips on Wilde to embarrass him, but Wilde was tipped and Queensberry was not allowed to enter. Queensberry's strongest weapon against Wilde was a list of men who had to testify against Wilde and who confirmed some kind of sexual act with Wilde. With many pieces of evidence the trial ended. Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labour. The subject of homosexuality caused many discussions. After the trial, some of Wilde's plays were banned or his name was removed. During his imprisonment, he wrote *De Profundis*.

After his release he wandered across Europe, staying at his friends' places. He spent his last days with Reginald Turner and Robert Ross. He died poor in a cheap Paris hotel on 30 of November in 1900 (Pearson, 1947, 370).

1.2 The Aesthetic movement

The Aesthetic movement started in the nineteenth century in Europe and its predecessors were Pre-Raphaelites. Aesthetic Movement emphasized aesthetic values over moral or social themes in art, literature or interior design. The Aesthetic movement was looking for new values in politics but also in philosophy. It was a reaction against urbanization and the industrial revolution. Aestheticism was manifesting the contradiction between the materialistic and spiritual, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie and art and nature. Oscar Wilde was considered the most prominent figure of the aesthetic movement, but before Wilde, the Aesthetic movement can be traced back to John Keats' poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) where it is written "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (Bradbury, 1997, 307). Other personalities who

revolved around the Aestheticism were for example Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson or Andrew Lang. Aesthetic movement's motto was "Art for art's sake." Tennyson paraphrased this motto as: "The filthiest of all paintings painted well/ Is mightier than the purest painted ill!" (Holman, 1985, 6). Oscar Wilde was called a dandy. Dandies concentrated on the visual and actual and Oscar Wilde himself looked for the beautiful in the ugly. A dandy was a person with a specific style and colourful dresses. A dandy takes care of his self-image and appearance. According to Wilde, artists do not need ethical sympathies, that he represents in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) which is about a beautiful man Dorian and his portrait; as he ages he is still looking very well, but the portrait is changed. The portrait of Dorian is getting worse and shows all the mistakes and corruption which Dorian was a part of, exposing his dark soul (Bradbury, 1997, 309).

Aestheticism revolved around the beauty of things. Aesthetes were fascinated by fashion, the elegance of lifestyle and decoration. In Wilde's play *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring was a prototype of a dandy. Wilde was known for his specific style and the way he dressed. Fashion history and its development was the topic of some of his writings, one of them being *The Philosophy of Dress* (1885). One of his sayings is:

"Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal."

Victorian England was the opposite of what Wilde admired. Colours such as black and grey were typical for the population in London. Wilde enjoyed flamboyant clothes, like his velvet coat, accessories and silk shirts with a collar. He said:

"One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art."

Being a dandy was not just about fashion, but it was the theory of life. Wilde's dandyism was obvious in his writings and lifestyle. The discovery of Japanese culture, which brought new kinds of decorations and accessories, had a big influence.

The Aesthetic Movement could be identified by its use of specific materials in interior design, such as ebonized wood the furniture was carved and highly decorated, by the usage of nature elements like birds, flowers, leaves or peacock feathers. The oriental influence was seen at pottery, ceramics and other objects. Also paintings with nature themes were seen in people's homes. This style was obvious in Oscar Wilde's rooms, he had statues, Greek carpets, and he was enthusiastic about decorative arts and known for his admiration of blue china. Aspects of this movement were satirised in the magazines *Punch* and *Patience*. During Oscar Wilde's tour across Canada and America he lectured on the topic of "The House Beautiful" (Ellmann, 1998, 194).

As Mitchell points out Victorian morality was the topic of discussion. The term "Victorian morality [...] has come to imply prudery, hypocrisy, sexual repression, and rigid social control" (Mitchell, 2009, 261). Morals were used to define social norms but judging art according to these norms lost its independence which was against freedom and aesthetic principles. Wilde used the word moral with society, but he did not see any association of morals in art, because art does not belong to society according to him. Art should not be judged by a moral standard. He argued that there can be an evil element in art as he demonstrated in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He was fascinated by the good and evil, beautiful and ugly. Young Dorian is a symbol of beauty and as time goes, he transforms into evil. Wilde encouraged beauty, youth and love but also pointed out weaknesses of human nature.

Wilde was aware of Victorian hypocrisy and selfishness. In his plays he focused on the topics of marriage, family and love where he exposed the hypocrisy of ruling classes, he used irony and paradox. Wilde had a good picture of middle-class society as he belonged to it as well and was surrounded by a fraudulent society. The dandy in Wilde's plays brings unique charm and comic form. Use of paradoxical language shows the nature of the upper class. The upper class had serious attitudes towards marriage. That is very well seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* where Cecily broke her engagement with Algernon several times because it would not have been considered a serious engagement if it had not been broken. Wilde had a strong

language skill, using satire and black humour, which was shocking but very successful. He criticizes social morality and reveals the virtue in human nature. Ugliness and evil were in some point part of beauty. Wilde wanted to be different from common society, by means of his language, lifestyle, behaviour and a dandy's attitude.

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."

2 Historical background of Victorian Age

In this chapter, I would like to write about the Victorian social class system, life in the cities, politics and living standards of the Victorian age, which influenced Oscar Wilde's works. Both analysed works were not only set in the Victorian period but also written at that time. As the Victorian era is considered the time of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 until her death in 1901. It was an era of a rapidly growing population, industrialization and urbanized society.

2.1 Victorian England

At the start of the Victorian era, there were 24 million people in Britain and Ireland. In the end, the number almost doubled. The number of people living in England and Ireland was 45.3 million in 1911, even though the number of dying children under the age of five was high (Steinbach, 2017, 3). Growing population led to the expansion of cities. Many people moved there from the countryside.

Cities were divided into two parts. One was for the middle class. This part of the city was safe and well cared about. The other was populated by the working class. This slum part of the city was much rougher and more dangerous. Simply said one was rich and the other one was poor. These poor zones were not usually that far from the rich part. The living conditions were extremely unpleasant, many facilities were shared between different families and there was a high risk of health issues due to the low hygiene standards. Victorians saw the solution in promotion of the city parks development. They were seen as places that would transform middle-class values to the working classes. They were places for popular sports activities like archery, badminton, football or rope-skipping (Steinbach, 2017, 24). Another key development was the rise of suburbs, which was mostly populated by the middle classes. Upper-class homes were quite public and used for formal activities, such as parties and political displays. Working-class homes were much smaller and usually in the city centre (Steinbach, 2017, 26).

In Victorian England music was very important, people would often gather in their own or at their friend's homes on Sunday evening and sing and play music. Music was important to all classes. For upper classes visiting the opera had a key role in maintaining social status.

2.2 Victorianism

Victorians had a deeply classed society. Every Victorian was well-aware of his or her class. Class would refer to their educational level, income, occupation, domestic standards and styles, politics, leisure, employment and values. In some classes, the middle-class father might send his sons to a prestige school to have them accepted as upper class as adults. British society was highly hierarchical. People from poor or rich society consider one another as completely different beings. Political economist David Ricardo (1772-1823) specified class models. The working class got its income from wages, middle class from salaries and profit and the upper class from property, rent and interests (Steinbach, 2017, 115).

People from the working class faced everyday struggles, like working for long hours in harsh conditions, because they needed to take care of their families. Women from the lower classes usually worked in laundries, textile mills and other factories. They worked often in a dirty and dangerous environment. Most of the jobs lower-class women had been almost the same as man's job. The only difference was in mining and collieries thanks to the Act in 1842 which forbade to employ women in this working area (Mitchell, 2009, 45). Middle classes had more time and money, so middle-class women did not need a job. Men tended to have a strong work ethic and even they would spend a lot of time at work. Middle-class women were usually busy with children and taking care of the household. Rights between women and men were unequal, everything a woman owned, inherited or earned was her husband's, and women had no right even to spend their own income on their own needs (Steinbach, 2017, 116-117). If middle class people had some free time, it usually involved a drink at a pub, gambling, or night at the music-hall. Upper-class people with high

incomes were able to take trips to Europe. They also attended the theatre or opera. They could purchase expensive accessories necessary for hunting or shooting. Many upper-class people purchased a piano which showed high social status. Owning a piano was a symbol of leisure, of social domesticity and social emulation. Overall, all classes were connected by alcohol which was very popular at that time.

The behaviour of the nineteenth-century people was formed by their position in society. There were situations which were connected to the particular behaviour. The upper classes studied how to dress according to their social status, what to eat and where they can be seen because they did not want to commit social offence. Existence of textbooks and articles which addressed these behaviour issues as well as the guidance on how to present their selves helped people to be respected. If some member of the upper society was seen in unfavourable dress or situation, newspapers would write about them. (Paterson, 2008, 121-122)

2.3 Victorian literature

Victorian values, standards and beliefs showed in many works of late Victorians authors. There were new ideas and revolutionary development which affected literature. In the play, *You Never Can Tell* (1896) by George Bernard Shaw the main character Gloria shows as a modern woman. The so-called 'New Woman' which emerged with the movement for women's rights were one of the inspirational laws of the Victorian period (Sanders, 2000, 459).

Many aspects of our entertainment, fiction and journalist culture can be found in the Victorian period. The Victorian era was an age of overwhelming literary achievement (Paterson, 2008, 171). Victorian literature was more widely available for people, because it became cheaper and widespread. The plots would usually revolve around identities, marriages, inheritances, and they often featured debt, detectives and other features of the Victorian legal system. Literature was often connected to politics. One of the other features was violence, which was seen in newspapers reporting violent crimes, also short stories involving violence were part of

the newspapers as a form of entertainment. All Victorian classes were interested in public executions by hanging of criminals.

Theatre in the Victorian period was partly censored because of the Theatre Licensing Act of 1737 by the Lord Chamberlain, which lasted for 230 years until the Theatre Act of 1968. This meant that a lot of subjects were forbidden as well as bad language and immorality (Bradbury, 1997, 340). Theatre expanded during the Victorian period, especially after the 1843 Act which abolished the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate theatres. Popular actors included Charles Kean (1811-1868), well known for his portrayal of Hamlet, his wife Ellen Tree Kean (1805-1880), for whom Sheridan Knowles wrote several plays, and for example "O" Smith (1786-1855), known for characters such as assassins and sorcerers. Victorians from upper classes and also middle classes had their private theatricals, including charades, also families would perform for one another's entertainment. One of the personalities who enjoyed amateur productions was Charles Dickens who promoted these performances, usually to raise money for a charitable cause. The early Victorian theatre was a combination of pantomime, melodrama, Shakespeare, comedy, opera and ballet. These performances were not characterized by a complex use of language, characters or engagement with social issues. They were more emotionally and visually arresting. In the early Victorian period, melodramas were the most popular. This nineteenth-century specific genre, was characterized by characters such as the lascivious villain and virtuoso ingenuity, there were complex family histories, secret pasts and plots that rely on coincidence and recognition scenes. Melodramas often critique elites by depicting working-class heroines' imperilment by aristocratic villains. (Steinbach, 2017, 215-217)

Victorian Britain had a high rate of literacy. Poetry became less widely-read and novels were central literary forms. One of the most important Victorian poets was Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861). She won her first praise by a collection of three poems. *Poems* (1844) made her the most popular poet of her day. *Poems* included a poem *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*. Another important poet was Chris-

tina Rossetti, who was a sister of pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Novels written in the Victorian period are still widely read. Victorian novelists Charles Dickens or George Eliot were favourites to Queen Victoria. Novels are usually quite long with a large stock of characters. Plots revolve around marriage, relationships between social and psychological and public and private spheres. Novels taught about moral principles and they ought to make their readers finer people. Furthermore, the novel was not only showing contemporary social issues, but it was also a topic of political discussions. *Oliver Twist* written by Charles Dickens was cited in arguments over the problems of urban slums and juvenile delinquency. Early popular genres in Victorian literature included “silver-fork”, Newgate” and gothic novels. Silver-fork novels portrayed fashionable upper-class life: for example, Edward Bulwer Lytton or Benjamin Disraeli. Newgate novels were the opposite. They revolved around criminals and underworld heroes. A great example of Newgate novels is Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard* or Charles Dickens’s second novel *Oliver Twist* (1838). Mid-century Victorian novels include Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Bleak House* (1852-1853) or Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848). From about 1860 it was sensational fiction which was most popular. They were full of gothic and supernatural elements. *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins is considered the first sensational novel. Other sensational novels include for example *East Lynne* (1861) by Henry Wood or *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Steinbach, 2017, 187-190).

Expansion of literature includes newspapers and magazines which were widely read. There were two types of papers, so-called popular papers which were read by all classes and more serious “class” or “quality” papers. These aimed for a specific group of people. There were various types of quality journals which focused on hobbies, literature, science, politics and other specific groups. Newspapers also expanded rapidly. The first were affordable Sunday weekly newspapers. They included political and crime reports, certain opinions, royal and celebrity gossip, advertisements, reviews, letters from readers, pieces of advice and serial fiction.

It was a period of the rise and flourishing culture. Another part which was glamorized were music halls and theatre. They were both part of everyday Victorian culture and focused on all classes. At the end of the nineteenth century even some Yiddish plays were performed, thanks to the great wave of immigrants from Europe, such as the melodrama *The Holy Sabbath*. In London were in Victorian era two main theatres: Covent Garden theatre and the new Prince of Wales's theatre which attracted a lot of middle-class people. Also, operas were widely popular, like *H.M.S. Pinafore* or *The Pirates of Penzance* by playwright W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and composer Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900). The most important late Victorian British playwrights were of Irish origin, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) who is described in detail in the main part of this thesis.

3 Social Criticism

Social criticism examines social groups, relationships, and values. It emphasizes the effect of the social forces that shape relationships between groups or classes of people. Social criticism can be understood as a power to change society. It can be perceived by politicians, rulers, religious leaders but also authors. The expression of negative opinion does not have to be harsh and brutal, but it can be done in a way which pushes society to realize the mistakes and give a request for some improvement. The criticism concerns experience or thought which is set by culture and society, in this thesis the society and cultural life of the Victorian period. Morality is a standard set by God, who is later replaced by people. Thomas Scanlon defines morality as “desire to be able to justify our actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject” (Walzer, 1987, 46). One of the critics of Victorian morality is Oscar Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well as *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde were written in the 1890s and reflected the overarching social issues that Oscar Wilde perceived about the Victorian era.

3.1 Connection between Oscar Wilde and social criticism

Oscar Wilde presented Victorian high society as money-oriented people, who spend their free time having parties, socializing, and discussing other people’s lives. Hypocrisy was usual as well as gossips. Society was motivated by money which led to lying to get into a better position in society. Women were seen as not as important as men who had power over them. Women’s role was to behave well and to support men, no matter how they act. But if their husbands were not around, they would talk badly about them, like at the party at the beginning of the comedy *An Ideal Husband*.

Oscar Wilde’s masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well as his other writings are highly connected to social and moral standards of the Victorian era and are uniquely written. These plays are society plays, they revolve around people,

their appearance and their behaviour. A typical character in the plays of this period was a woman with a dark past. Such a woman was typically an extravagant outsider and her presence existed on social hierarchy; Mrs Cheveley from *An Ideal Husband* is one of the examples. The male characters in Wilde's plays are witty, shocking but authoritative and these are particular characteristics of a dandy. Wilde's dandies are elegant, well dressed and have their own moral and ethical principles. Wilde demonstrates the importance of intellectual but also emotional distance by showing how his figures lose authority. Lord Goring from *An Ideal Husband* is proud to be one of the edges of society but he falls from dandy to fiancé when he is ushered into the fold as a husband to be (Varty, 2000, xvi). In Wilde's comedies, we can come across experiments with women's authority such as in the case of Mabel Chiltern from *An Ideal Husband*.

4 Analysis of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

This part of my thesis deals with social criticism in Wilde's greatest comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The comedy consists of a three-act structure and the way it was written was unique in the language and the overall plot. Wilde's apparent critique of late nineteenth century culture, behaviour and customs of his days was the source of the comedy's success. Wilde announced that the play was

"exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy ... that we should treat all the trivial things in life very seriously, and all the serious things with sincere and studied triviality." (O. Wilde, 1895)

In the play, Wilde makes serious situations which appear in everyday lives of Victorian society, ridiculous. He concerns with deception by the invention of "Bunburying", avoiding one's duties and responsibilities by claiming to have appointments to see a fictitious person (YourDictionary) as well as with self-deception when Cecily writes her diary, tyranny of Lady Bracknell's prohibition and even aggression which is represented in an argument about Earnest between Cecily and Gwendolen.

4.1 Marriage

The main motif of the plot is marriage. Marriage is mostly a political act. Inter-marriages are necessary because they are one of the ways how to gain wealth and property. Marriage determines what social class a family belongs to and it is a matter of business. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this opinion is expressed in the first act in the conversation between Algernon and Lane, who is his servant.

Algernon, who is from the upper class, is surprised how lax view on marriage Lane has and is concerned about a lower-class moral responsibility as Lane expresses that his marriage was a "misunderstanding". That exposes the different

views of the upper class towards the lower classes (Bennett, 2015, 28). The conversation later continues with Jack Worthing who confides in Algernon with his plans of marrying Gwendolen. Algernon responds: "I thought you had come up for pleasure? ... I call [a proposal] a business." (2000, 365) Algernon sees marriages as very unromantic and has a strong negative opinion on marriage. He even declared that if he marries, he will try to forget about the marriage (365). These marriages were typical for the Victorian aristocracy. Private balls and parties were arranged so that young men and women of suitable backgrounds could meet. Before a girl could be considered suitable for marriage, she came out of school and was introduced to society. Women were aware of their position. Wilde exposes his view on women and marriage when Algernon says: "girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right." (365) Wilde's invention of Bunbury is important to those who marry. Algernon sees Bunbury as a great opportunity to escape from married life unlike Jack Worthing who believes in true love and marriage.

ALGERNON: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a tedious time of it.

JACK: That is a nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON: Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is a company and two is none. (369)

As has been said, marriages were formal acts which brought money to the family. The character of Lady Bracknell is a prototype of a wealthy Victorian woman who is looking for a suitable fiancé for her daughter Gwendolen. Jack has to go on strict interrogation to prove that he is worthy of Lady Bracknell's daughter. Lady Bracknell's reaction to Jack's doubtful origin makes her question his suitability. Lady

Bracknell compared Jack with a parcel because Jack was found in a handbag in the railway station. She wants him to find some relatives to make a quality alliance.

LADY BRACKNELL: You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel. Good-morning, Mr Worthing! (377)

Wilde's critique of marriages is quite evident, especially regarding the importance of money, which has a fundamental role in arranging a marriage.

4.2 Moral principles

The Importance of Being Earnest is connected to high society which was also society which Oscar Wilde was a part of. He revolved around a society the members of which thought about themselves as better than most people. Hypocrisy was in everyday life; people were able to lie in order to have better social status and to get closer with the aristocracy. Wilde said about the philosophy of the play: "We should treat all the trivial things very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." One of the trivial situations treated with importance in the play were cucumber sandwiches for Lady Bracknell. In contrast, situations like killing a brother were projected as casualness; when Jack informs his family about Ernest's death, he does not show any hard feelings and when Algernon as fake brother Ernest shows up, he is frustrated instead of happy. (Leggatt, 1998, 33)

The main topic of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* involves having a double life. For Jack, it is a way how to retain a high social status which involves having right moral principles, while being in the country and being a guardian and a role model to Miss Cecily. In contrast, Jack spends his second life in the city where his morals are suppressed. This double life is also lived by Algernon whose intentions are more selfish. One of his roles is being a helper to a non-existent sick man

to avoid family gatherings and to have fun in the city. Algernon's second life involves being the perfect man of Victorian society and acting according to the Victorian morals. Lying seems to be usual in Victorian society and Wilde was not afraid to point it out. It is one of the topics of many of Wilde's writings. Jack explains the reason for having a double life in the following way:

JACK: My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple. (368)

Algernon is the dandy of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his humorous way of life and his charm brings the unique freshness and excitement. His character is not typical for Victorian society, he does not believe in its morals. At one point Gwendolen even confirms that Algernon adopts a strictly immoral attitude towards life (380).

The women's role in Wilde's plays reveals the feminine part of Victorian culture. Gwendolen is one of the members of high society. She says about herself at one point:

GWENDOLEN: I am always smart! Am I not, Mr Worthing?

JACK: You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN: Oh! I hope not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions. (370)

Gwendolen's focus is not only on marriage but also on self-development. She seems over-confident, does not think before she acts and her reactions can be hasty, but she claims that she is never wrong (372). She is proud to be who she is but also quite stubborn and everything must be the way she wants. The triviality like the importance of the name Ernest is a requirement for her.

GWENDOLEN: My own Ernest!

JACK: But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN: But your name is Ernest.

JACK: I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then? (373)

She even says: "The only really safe name is Ernest" (373). But even for Cecily, the name is important, because she already fantasised about Ernest and made up a relationship which Cecily had with Ernest for a while. Gwendolen is more practical than Cecily, but they both share their stubbornness. When Gwendolen meets Cecily for the first time, she immediately makes an opinion about her, which is eventually wrong.

GWENDOLEN: Cecily Cardew? What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong. (396)

Cecily is very romantic, naive, fragile, a dreamer and lover of nature. Cecily is a complete opposite of Victorian attitude. She is not interested in inventions and modern lifestyle. She falls in love with uncle Jack's non-existent brother Ernest. Even though she never saw him before, Cecily creates a relationship with him. Their relationship is described in her diary. Cecily informs Algernon, who arrives under the

identity of Jack's brother Ernest, about their history and he accepts the role as her fiancé.

4.3 Theme of Women

In the play, women are deceived by men. Oscar Wilde criticizes the men and women of the Victorian society. The men's superiority over women is illustrated in connection to marriage. Algernon does not seem to care about women's feelings. Women are according to him naive and their duty is to be good wives. As an example can be used a conversation between Jack and Algernon at the end of the first act.

JACK: My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

ALGERNON: The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain. (379)

Ignorance of women's feelings is quite evident in this situation. Wilde criticised the behaviour of men towards women. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the characters of Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen are more formal, they behave in the way which is expected of them. They have a more business-like view on life and marriage. Lady Bracknell is an aristocratic woman and does what is proper for her daughter, but also immoral and manipulative which Wilde criticized in Victorian society. Her strict rules and her effort to marry her daughter Gwendolen to a suitable man shows the fact that she might not have had a big fortune until she married into the aristocracy (Ruby, 1997, 227). For Algernon, being in her company was very tiring, boring and the purpose for creating Mr Bunbury. Her daughter Gwendolen was influenced by her mother's view, she acts rather formally, is strong-minded and too idealistic. Her role is to represent the artificial people in Victorian society. The way

she speaks to everybody is highly formal, which exposes her confidence. Her conversation with Cecily provides an example:

GWENDOLEN: Perhaps this might be a favourable opportunity for my mentioning who I am. My father is Lord Bracknell. You have never heard of papa, I suppose?

CECILY: I don't think so.

GWENDOLEN: Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive. Cecily, mamma, whose views on education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?

CECILY: Oh! not at all, Gwendolen. I am very fond of being looked at. (397)

Unlike Gwendolen, Cecily is very romantic, innocent and despises the life of the Victorian society. She is very critical, naive and has big imagination which is not a feature preferred by high society. Cecily and Gwendolen share some similarities, as they both are under the control of other women. In Gwendolen's case, it is her mother Lady Bracknell and in Cecily's case, it is Miss Prism. They are seen as evil, but they have good intentions (Bennett, 2015, 128). Cecily is as confident as Gwendolen and after the revelation of the double lives of Jack and Algernon, she and Gwendolen take the authority over the men, which was controversial during the Victorian age, as men were always superior to women. Their pride is shown in act three:

GWENDOLEN: But we will not be the first to speak.

CECILY: Certainly not. (405)

But the sacrifice of being christened Ernest, which Jack and Algernon are about to do, makes Gwendolen and Cecily rethink the situation and see them as courageous men. They realise the unprecedented abilities that the men possess. They appreciate the men and the fraud is forgiven, which seems unreal in modern society, but the Victorian Era had different priorities.

GWENDOLEN AND CECILY: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK AND ALGERNON: Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

GWENDOLEN: For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

JACK: I am.

CECILY: To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

ALGERNON. I am!

GWENDOLEN: How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

JACK: We are.

CECILY. They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing. (406)

Wilde's own experience and his life are projected in the play. The character of Algernon is connected to Lord Alfred Douglas. When Wilde was arrested because of gross indecency, he wrote a letter *De Profundis* in which Wilde complained about Douglas's behaviour towards money and him spending his money on extravagant dinners. He wrote "you had no motives in life. You had appetites merely." Algernon's self-inviting to dinners, having a big appetite and being selfish was a characteristic which irritated Wilde (Leggatt, 1998, 31-32).

Algernon's theory of "Bunburying" involves creating "Ernest" for convenience. Jack creates "Ernest" as a way how to be free of responsibilities in London while in the country he is a respected and a well-behaved man. Marriage between Jack and

Gwendolen is controlled by Lady Bracknell, a wealthy woman who wants to retain her high social status. To be on the top of the class she has to find a suitable man for Gwendolen, which Jack with his mysterious past is not. According to Lady Bracknell, true love is not a reason for marriage, as money and family line are more important. Women show courage even though men are superior, as Cecily and Gwendolen create a sisterhood-like relationships and are angry with Algernon and Jack who lied to them. This relationship is strong because of the same experience (Bennett, 2015, 170). The name Ernest plays a key role in the play. Ernest is a name which is irreplaceable. It is the reason for lying, having a double life and it makes women more interested in its bearer. The fact that lying does not make the men guilty shows that lying was not uncommon in Victorian Era. Wilde presents what he experienced in a humorous way, in which the Victorian aristocracy could see themselves and realise how hypocritical their society was. Overall, this play has been Wilde's biggest success. Wilde presented the Victorian society as too serious and he made fun of it by creating the characters' double lives and making chaos in the names and the relationships.

5 Analysis of *An Ideal Husband*

This part is dedicated to the other of Oscar Wilde's masterpieces, *An Ideal Husband*. In this play, the characters overcome their misunderstandings and hard-headedness and learn to be honest, to forgive, to commit, and to give. The plot revolves around blackmailing and guilt. The character of Sir Robert Chiltern is blackmailed by Mrs Cheveley who has a letter which confirms that behind Sir Robert Chiltern's achievement was a fraud.

5.1 Marriage

The name *An Ideal Husband* suggests that marriage is one of the primary themes. While the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* focused on building up a marriage, the play *An Ideal Husband* concentrates more on the relationship within the marriage and its importance in society. With its characters, *An Ideal Husband* parodies and ironizes loyalty, sacrifice, love, forgiveness, and devotion.

In the first act, there is a dialogue at a party between Lord Goring, Mrs Marchmont and Lady Basildon, which instantly leads to the topic of marriage. They discuss how difficult is the life of a wife to a perfect man, as she is not appreciated enough.

MRS. MARCHMONT: Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!

LADY BASILDON: Yes, always to others, have we not?

LORD GORING: And those are the views of the two ladies who are known to have the most admirable husbands in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT: That is exactly what we can't stand. My Reginald is quite hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest element of excitement in knowing him.

LORD GORING. How terrible! Really, the thing should be more widely known!

LADY BASILDON: Basildon is quite as bad; he is as domestic as if he was a bachelor.

MRS. MARCHMONT: My poor Olivia! We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it.

LORD GORING: I should have thought it was the husbands who were punished.

MRS. MARCHMONT: Oh, dear no! They are as happy as possible! And as for trusting us, it is tragic how much they trust us.

LADY BASILDON: Perfectly tragic! (290-291)

That reveals how people thought about life and lacked something exciting instead of political discussions, which they felt forced to be a part of because of a good image and it was expected of them. Being a wife in Victorian aristocracy involved being supportive to their husband and it was inevitable to encourage them to stay on the top of high society.

In act three Lord Goring supports Sir Robert and tries to help with the relationship in Sir Robert's marriage, which is endangered because his wife Lady Chiltern was informed by Mrs Cheveley about the fraud Sir Robert made to have a successful political career. Lord Goring offers help and says: "Well, I will make her stand by her husband. That is the only thing for her to do. That is the only thing for any woman to do. It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one sided institution" (328). Lady Chiltern wanted a marital life based on adoration, posing her husband as an ideal in both public and private life. As the play progresses, Lady Chiltern's love comes to appear unreasonable and then Sir Robert's secret sin is revealed. Eventually, Lady Chiltern agrees to forgive Sir Robert in order to retain their high social status and because that is the morally right thing to do. Mrs Chiltern agrees to married life with a man whose successful career was made out of terrible act. It is typical for Wilde's plays that the marriage is damaged by certain situations with comic elements and the relationships end in a good way (Ruby, 1997, 215). At the end of the fourth act, she learns from Lord Goring that

“A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses” (358). For Lady Chiltern, Sir Robert was an ideal husband, he was respected in society and well-known. Losing this position would lead to a public drama. The secret was better unrevealed. That is how society worked, if a secret provided one with an opportunity, even when it was illegal, it was worth it.

Marriage was a matter of course in high society and intermarriages were not unusual. Lord Goring, who is a dandy of this play, a fashionable man with interests in other people's relationships, was pushed by his father Lord Caversham to marriage and forced to have a public life.

LORD GORING. But it is after seven, father, and my doctor says I must not have any serious conversation after seven. It makes me talk in my sleep.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Talk in your sleep, sir? What does that matter? You are not married.

LORD GORING. No, father, I am not married.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Hum! That is what I have come to talk to you about, sir. You have got to get married, and at once. Why, when I was your age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three months, and was already paying my addresses to your admirable mother. Damme, sir, it is your duty to get married. You can't be always living for pleasure. Every man of position is married nowadays. Bachelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You must get a wife, sir. Look where your friend Robert Chiltern has got to by probity, hard work, and a sensible marriage with a good woman. Why don't you imitate him, sir? Why don't you take him for your model? (329-330)

As the play progresses, Lord Goring is about to propose to Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert's younger sister. Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern have a controversial view

on marriage. Throughout the play, the pair have an amoral attitude, despise the demands of duty and ironize social relationships. In the very last conversation in the play, Mabel Chiltern, upon accepting Lord Goring's proposal, responds:

LORD CAVERSHAM. And if you don't make this young lady an ideal husband, I'll cut you off with a shilling.

MABEL CHILTERN. An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What do you want him to be then, dear?

MABEL CHILTERN. He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . to be . . . oh! a real wife to him. (360)

With the words "An ideal husband!" they both reject moral principles, do not care about what society will think of them and are not concerned about how a man and woman should look ideally.

5.2 Moral principles

In *An Ideal Husband*, morality and ethics are bound to respect and reputation. The play revolves around high society and, as it was mentioned, being on the top of the social class was a true achievement. The first act is set in London in the Chiltern's house, full of important politicians and their wives which represents the upper-class way of entertainment. Wilde himself was part of this society and saw the effort to amaze other participants that he exposed in the play (Ruby, 1997, 158). If people behaved morally, according to ethics and had good manners, they were respected among the highest society, while those whose deeds were undesirable were punished and cut off from society. People did what was socially expected while having secrets in order to gain richness, respect and social status. In this example, Mrs

Cheveley assumes that Sir Robert will do what it takes to get what he wants politically, because he had accepted that law before, and Mrs Cheveley expects he will do so again.

MRS. CHEVELEY: My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive. I know I am. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms. (295)

In this case, Sir Robert points out that in politics one has to make sacrifices. He claims that the avoidance of principles is inevitable in business. Lady Chiltern is disappointed in her supposedly ideal husband. She believes in honesty and at first, she does not tolerate Sir Robert's imperfections.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: Gertrude, truth is a very complex thing, and politics is a very complex business. There are wheels within wheels. One may be under certain obligations to people that one must pay. Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise. Every one does.

LADY CHILTERN: Compromise? Robert, why do you talk so differently to-night from the way I have always heard you talk? Why are you changed?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: I am not changed. But circumstances alter things.

LADY CHILTERN: Circumstances should never alter principles! (302)

This time Wilde exposes his view on principles. There is an illustration of how Lord Goring preferred what mattered to him, not to the society, its rules and moral standards. He was too old to be a bachelor, but it did not matter to him. Lord Caversham expresses his admiration towards Sir Robert Chiltern and sets him as an example for his son Lord Goring. Lord Caversham describes Robert as a person with high character, high moral tone and high principles. His son has nothing that an ideal

Victorian man has. Lord Goring, as he says, does not live according to principles and prefers prejudices.

5.3 Theme of Women

In Victorian England, women weren't equal to men in public life. In this play, there is an unpleasant perception of women, in the most cases. For example, Mabel Chiltern's view on life is different from the usual one of the upper classes. These women are well aware of their position and power over men. The power they use whether it is for love or hate.

In the first act, we meet Lady Basildon and Mrs Marchmont. These women represent hypocrisy among high society. When they talk about men, they share the same opinion which is that men are very boring, and women suffer when they are having a discussion with them. But it is their duty to visit these parties to find useful connections with other politicians and stay in the upper class. Like Lady Chiltern says, she should have some serious purpose in life (281). The fact that women talk to men makes them more attractive even though they do not enjoy it.

LADY BASILDON: What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

MRS. MARCHMONT: And how well it becomes us, Olivia! (289)

One of the important women in the play is Mrs Chiltern, who represents the respectable, supportive Victorian woman. Despite trying to get control over her husband, she falls back into the traditional women's role. She respects the standards of society and continues being a role model for other women. The patriarchy is obvious. More controversial is the behaviour of Mrs Cheveley. She confirms that she prefers men's company: "I am afraid I am not fond of girl friends" (322). She is very ambitious, smart and talented, but also selfish and looking for power. She is not

afraid of being looked at. The way she dresses may seem immoral to Victorian society. In this conversation, the power of Mrs Cheveley and her mysterious behaviour are noticeable.

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

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

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

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do. (286)

The extravagance of Mrs Cheveley's appearance is described by Lord Goring who commented on the way she looked like "far too much rouge last night, and not quite enough clothes. That is always a sign of despair in a woman" (311). Mrs Cheveley is witty and wealthy, she prefers Europe to English society and has a past with Lord Goring. They were in love, but now he despises her. (Raby, 1997, 156)

The male characters of the play talk about women as less important. Women are there to look good by the side of men. As an example, Lord Caversham has a very traditional view of women.

LORD GORING: But women who have common sense are so curiously plain, father, aren't they? Of course I only speak from hearsay.

LORD CAVERSHAM: No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex. (333)

An Ideal Husband is a play that brought humour into the Victorian society as well as other Wilde's comedies. This one is concerned with fake success. While Sir Robert is seen as a much respected man without any flaws, his successful past is tied

with lies. His wife Gertrude loves him for being an honest man and simply an ideal husband who should be a role model for every man in the Victorian society. The realization that he is not perfect destroys Gertrude's view on him and she feels betrayed. As well as in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, lying seems fine, if it makes people's status high. Women are again under men's power, but in this case it was Mrs Cheveley who showed courage and was not afraid to blackmail Robert. An entertaining addition to the play is provided by the character of Mabel and Lord Goring who do not believe in principles. They show their pure nature without lying. Avoiding principles and values, which Victorian society set up, was inappropriate and discussed among the society. Morality, private and public life is brought up in the play in order to show what Wilde experienced himself.

6 Conclusion

The plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* have a lot in common. They deal with the same topics: marriage, moral principles and women. Wilde wrote about Victorian society in the late nineteenth century, depicting the values and attitudes towards lying, marriage, women and social standards which Victorian society created. Oscar Wilde lived this life. He came from upper-class society and he knew how society of that time worked. Wilde himself had parties, was admired and knew many important figures in the Victorian society.

His personality was identified with a dandy, a man interested in fashion and appearance, wearing buttonholes, flamboyant clothes and interested in the beauty of art. A dandy is also present in both Wilde's plays analysed in this thesis. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the dandy was presented by the character of Algernon. In *An Ideal Husband* it was Lord Goring who was interested in his appearance. Wilde identified with both of them. They were fresh, entertaining and they had a wit which made Wilde's plays unique, being one of the reason of their success.

Marriage was one of the major topics in both plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest* concerns with life before marriage, and what leads to being married. Marriage in this case was more about the importance of family line, income and suitability. *An Ideal Husband* concerns with life after marriage and the relationship within the marriage, reflecting naivety and the importance of honesty and trust. In both plays, the characters who prepare for a marriage or are married deal with lies motivated by the aim to have a better life, but eventually the lies are exposed and despised.

Standards of the Victorian society are based on the class system. Victorian society was highly hierarchical. Social class system was evident, and everyone knew where they belonged. The analysed plays revolved around high society. In both plays men were superior to women. In the Victorian society women in the aristocracy were more like additions to their husbands and their supporters. This attitude was

seen in the play *An Ideal Husband* where men talked about women as not intelligent. There is a difference in the other analysed play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where women were more appreciated. Every couple was connected with the man's lies, but it was also women who were lying. Those lies were an easy way how to remain or get into a better position in the society.

In both plays, there is unique behaviour by women. Women in Wilde's plays are strong, passionate and supportive with each other, but they can create tension among each other as well. Women in both plays take in some moment power over men. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily and Gwendolyn create friendship and set against their potential husbands because of their lies. In *An Ideal Husband* there is no friendship between women, but Gertrude still has an opportunity to have power over her husband and Mrs Cheveley has power over Robert thanks to the knowledge of his past. In the end, in both plays men will regain their power over women.

Both plays have another thing in common. They are written with unique wit and humorous language. They have happy endings and are filled with humorous events, which provides a better view and understanding of the Victorian society.

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Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na kritiku společnosti v komediích Oscara Wilda. Práce zahrnuje podrobnosti z osobního života Oscara Wilda, informace o estetickém hnutí, jehož byl Wilde nedílnou součástí, a informace o viktoriánském období, dále vymezuje pojem sociální kritiky a Wildovo spojení s ní. Tato práce je zaměřená na komedie *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* a *Ideální manžel*. Analyzované hry se soustředí na téma manželství, morálních principů a zastoupení žen ve společnosti během viktoriánského období. Práce odkrývá pohled Oscara Wilda na společnost ve viktoriánské době a to, jak se Wildovy vlastní zkušenosti a pohled na společnost zobrazují v daných dílech.

8 Anotace

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Název Práce:	Kritika viktoriánské společnosti v komediích Oscara Wilda
Název v angličtině:	Criticism of Victorian Society in Comedies by Oscar Wilde
Anotace práce:	Tato práce se zaměřuje na kritiku společnosti v komediích Oscara Wilda. Soustředí se na dvě komedie. <i>Jak je důležité míti Filipa</i> (1895) a <i>Ideální manžel</i> (1895) a sleduje jak, tyto texty odráží viktoriánskou společnost a kritizují ji. Práce se zaměřuje především na témata manželství a morálky a na zobrazení ženských postav. Také ukazuje, jaký měl Oscar Wilde pohled na společnost a jaké byly jeho hodnoty.
Klíčová slova:	Viktoriánská Anglie, Oscar Wilde, sociální kritika, komedie, drama, literatura, estétství, morálka, manželství, ženy
Anotace v angličtině:	This thesis concerns with social criticism in Oscar Wilde comedies. The thesis focuses on two comedies: <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> (1895) and <i>An Ideal Husband</i> (1895), by examining how they reflect and criticise Victorian society. In particular the thesis deals with the topics of marriage, moral principles and the portrayal of women. Also, it shows Wilde's view of society in the Victorian era and his values.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Victorian England, Oscar Wilde, social criticism, comedy, drama, literature, aestheticism, morality, marriage, women
Přílohy vázané v práci:	
Rozsah práce:	44s.
Jazyk práce:	Anglický