

PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY  
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**The Status of Women in Victorian Upper Class Society And  
Their Portrayal in the Works of Oscar Wilde**  
Bachelor Thesis

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**Postavení žen z vyšší vrstvy viktoriánské společnosti a jejich  
zobrazení v tvorbě Oscara Wildea**

Bakalářská práce

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**ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:**

Práce se zabývá analýzou čtyř divadelních her Oscara Wildea z prostředí vyšší vrstvy viktoriánské společnosti na konci 19. století a zaměřuje se na postavení a chování ženských postav. Teoretická část se zabývá sociálním a historickým kontextem dané doby a cílem praktické části práce je na základě rozboru her zjistit, zda bylo jejich chování v souladu s očekáváním, nebo zda se lišilo a jak.

Práce bere v potaz nejen čtyři konkrétní díla, ale také celkový styl psaní Oscara Wildea a jeho reputaci v daném období.

**SEZNAM DOPORUČENÉ LITERATURY:**

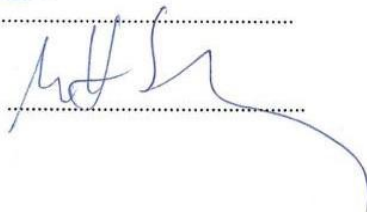
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## Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma “The Status of Women in Victorian Upper Class Society and Their Portrayal in the Works of Oscar Wilde” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne

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podpis

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## Introduction

Oscar Wilde is definitely one of the most significant authors of all times and his witty and hilarious way of writing amuses readers all over the world to this day. Although he wrote works of different genres, plays were what really made him famous. Unlike many other authors, Oscar Wilde was given an opportunity to experience popularity among people during his lifetime. On the other hand, he also found out what it feels like to fall from the top to the bottom.

He was a good observer of relationships between people, affection of spouses, the machinations of mothers who wanted their daughters marry well, or self-representation due to the social status of each person. What we can find hilarious about his plays nowadays is that he was, sometimes secretly and sometimes frankly, mocking the society and making fun of the values worshipped by its members and yet he still managed to gain recognition among those people who did not see the mockery. His plays were highly attended by noble men and their posh wives, who would spend a nice evening in the theatre with friends, laughing at amusing dialogues written by Oscar Wilde, without realizing that they were his inspiration.

This thesis will analyse four of his famous plays, set in the Victorian upper class society: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They were all performed for the first time in the range of three years (1892-1895) and this period is generally thought of as the highlight of Oscar Wilde's career.

The aim of the thesis is to compare a stereotypical and expected way of life in the circles of the upper class in Victorian era to the settings which Oscar Wilde made up for his plays; how similar and how different his delineation and reality were. Moreover, the aim is to draw attention to the wit of Oscar Wilde and his ability to mock the society with which he had such a contradictory relationship: on one hand, he loved to be the centre of attention, on the other side, morality and haughtiness sickened him. The society also did not have a definite opinion on Wilde: he was adored and popular when on the top and reprobate and forgotten when the scandal of his life arose.

When analysing the plays, the emphasis will be placed on the female characters, their position in the society – which was changing crucially at the time – and their behaviour. Female protagonists of the plays will be characterized according to their actions in the plays and the analysis will include male views on women as well.

To fully understand the context and background of the plays and to be able to judge whether the female behaviour met the expectations or was found different, one must take into account also the time in which the author wrote, therefore there will be a chapter dealing with life and everyday issues of the late Victorian era. Its aim will be to outline the prototype of a Victorian upper class woman and her features.

Oscar Wilde was interesting not only as an author, but also as an individual and “celebrity” of the time who was often being talked of and he definitely did not fit into the picture of an ideal Victorian man with strict morals. His own marriage was marked with the scandal which led to accusation of homosexuality so it is interesting to observe what a man whose own marriage went from happiness to a total disaster has to say about male-female relationships and what role he attributes to women in his plays.

Today, at a distance in time, we can depersonalize from the prejudices of the time when Oscar Wilde lived and fully appreciate his work. As Leonard Cresswell Ingleby wrote already in 1907, “today the name of Oscar Wilde is no longer identified solely with disaster and shame. It is a name which the world at large recognizes as standing for the work of a powerful, if bizarre, genius without parallel in our time”.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born on 16 October 1854 in Dublin as the second of three children of William and Jane Wilde. His father was a doctor and his mother wrote poetry under the pseudonyms Speranza and John Fenshaw Ellis. Comtesse de Brémont, a friend of Oscar's wife, who later wrote a book about him and his mother claimed that he “possessed the feminine soul”<sup>2</sup> and that it “gave him the lust for the strange forbidden pleasures”.<sup>3</sup> Julian Hawthorne, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote into his diary after meeting Oscar Wilde that “there is a sort of horribly feminine air about him”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cresswell Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde: Some Reminiscences* (London: T. Werner Laurie n.d. [1912]), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Lynwood and Co., 1913), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), 57.



Oscar Wilde had a close relationship to his mother, who was a handsome independent woman thanks to whom he got in touch with writing. Her husband had a number of illegitimate children but she stood by him until his death in 1876. Few years later, she moved to London to be closer to Oscar. G.J. Renier says that “Oscar was allowed to listen to this talk from his early youth, and learned to accept as the supreme values in his life his mother's amoralism, her wit and her love of the perfect phrase”.<sup>5</sup> The reason why Oscar admired his mother so much was that she was very intelligent, “a brilliant talker and an accomplished hostess”.<sup>6</sup> She learned Latin, French, German and Italian for pleasure and became interested in the Young Ireland movement; she was a proud Irish like her son.

As a child Oscar was not very keen on outdoor activities and he was not popular among his peers, either. While they were interested in sports and games, he liked to watch sunsets, read books and enjoy being alone. Yet, “despite the clumsiness and unalertness of his appearance during Wilde's school-days, there was nevertheless that distinct touch of dandyism about the lad which was to develop so much in after life”.<sup>7</sup> However, as a child he was not considered handsome, since “by the age of thirteen he had become clumsy, ponderous and over-large, loutish in fact”.<sup>8</sup>

Except for clothes, Wilde liked to differentiate himself from others in more ways: he was extremely interested in the arts, which led to his later interest in aestheticism. He took advantage of the “mask” of a notable and extraordinary artist he created for himself in order to get people's attention. He would zest all of that by a certain level of affectation and gained many admirers and haters at the same time. Besides that, people enjoyed his talking because Wilde was a “brilliant conversationalist”.<sup>9</sup>

His language was vivid and sophisticated and he soon realized that this ability was his strength and a way how to dominate, because “to attain social position and prestige was the ambition of his life, and to that end he studied the art of conversation,

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<sup>5</sup> Gustaaf Johannes Renier, *Oscar Wilde* (Hamburg: Albatross, 1934), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen, 1947), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 153.

the mastery of which would, he believed, give him complete ascendancy wherever the well-born were gathered together”.<sup>10</sup>

He attended Trinity College in Dublin for 3 years from 1871; later on he studied at the Magdalen College in Oxford where his interest in aestheticism arose. He was recognised as a brilliant mind winning many prizes, including the gold medal for Greek.

Hesketh Pearson in his biography *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1947) suggests that what made Oscar Wilde such a complex person was the fact that he was half a boy and half a man: in one part of his soul he was very childish and vulnerable, while in the other one he was already mature and found himself.<sup>11</sup>

In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, with whom he had two sons. She was a charming lady interested in literature and her dowry was used to buy a house for the couple in London, as G.J. Renier mentions in Wilde's biography.<sup>12</sup> However, their small income was not enough to run a household, therefore Oscar had to write for newspapers and give lectures. His main aim was to gain recognition as a writer but at the time “he had established a well-deserved reputation as a talker and a wit”<sup>13</sup> only. It is possible that exactly his loquacity and ability to talk for a long time and still make sense is what helped him to write so well. Once William Butler Yeats, another Irish author said: “My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment. I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all over night with labour and yet all spontaneous”.<sup>14</sup>

Some of his contemporaries suggest that Wilde's behaviour changed a lot when he became famous thanks to his plays and even before when he had spread his genius to the States. He liked to enjoy luxurious clothes, food and alcohol and “his fame intoxicated him”.<sup>15</sup> After all, alcohol was what accelerated his decay at the end of his life.

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<sup>10</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 29.

## 1.1. Dandyism

The word dandy is one of the strong associations with Oscar Wilde; it was a part of his image and a part of his personality. What does it actually mean?

Cambridge Free English Dictionary of British English describes dandy as “a man, especially, in the past, who dressed in expensive, fashionable clothes and was very interested in his own appearance”.<sup>16</sup>

According to one of the biographies of Oscar Wilde, “opinions differ very much as to whether Wilde was a handsome man or not, though it is agreed on all hands that his presence was distinguished and unusual”.<sup>17</sup>

His contemporaries remember that Oscar insisted on wearing a tall hat (typically worn only on Sundays) during the whole week because he really liked it and did not care that he was the only one who did so. Since his schooldays he was found a little eccentric, both as to his clothes and as to his behaviour. His clothes, in general, were extraordinary, but since he was aesthete concerned with beauty, he probably liked it. Wilde himself called it an “aesthetic costume” which consisted of “a velvet, coat, knee breeches, a soft shirt with a large turn-down collar, somewhat in the Cavalier fashion and a huge bunched-up tie of some pale green or terra-cotta tone”.<sup>18</sup>

Although Wilde was Irish, he is said to be the most famous dandy of the English society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His clothes in connection with his way of talking and a certain tone of eccentricity made him an unforgettable person. He enriched his “version” of dandy with sarcastic but witty quotes or epigrams and “any peculiarity in his clothes or appearance was forgotten as soon as he began to speak”.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of extravagant clothes and witty remarks were not only Oscar Wilde's real hallmark, but he also liked to make up dandies for his plays: Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* and Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. All these dandies were unmarried men who cared about their image and reception in the society more than they would admit – just like Oscar.

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<sup>16</sup> Cambridge Dictionaries Online, s.v. “dandy”

[http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/dandy\\_1?q=dandy](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/dandy_1?q=dandy) (accessed April 30, 2014)

<sup>17</sup> Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 35.

## 1.2. Friends, Inspirations, Enemies, Critics

Yeats was not the only “celebrity” who had an opportunity to meet Wilde. He was surrounded by many interesting artists of the time, some of them were his friends or acquaintances, while others were not that fond of him and we can talk about certain hatred.

One of Wilde's closest friends and enemies at the same time was James Abbott McNeill Whistler, a 20 years older American-born and British-based painter. They shared a favour for aestheticism and Whistler followed the credo “art for art's sake”. Wilde and Whistler were both figures in café Society in Paris and frequently appeared as caricatures in the magazine *Punch* and *Patience*, which they both found funny. It is said that many of Wilde's witty comments were originally said by Whistler, as L. Peters claims in Whistler's biography.<sup>20</sup>

It took some time to be seen that Whistler was a rather egoistic person and could not stand criticism; he got angry with everyone who disagreed with him, therefore it was pretty clear that his friendship with Wilde would not last forever. Their (at first innocent) arguments and insults in public were taken more and more seriously. In the mid-1880s Whistler turned against the aesthetic movement and Wilde and when he was accused of homosexuality, Whistler mocked him and his work publicly in a letter addressed to the magazine *The World*, written in 1886: “What has Oscar in common with Art? Except that he dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces? Oscar – the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar – with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions...of others”.<sup>21</sup>

Whistler and Wilde made a couple whose presence always got attention – either they were friends or rivals. Ellen Terry, an English actress wrote in her autobiography *The Story of My Life* (1908) that “the most remarkable men I have known were, without a doubt, Whistler and Oscar Wilde. This does not imply that I liked them better

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Peters, *James McNeill Whistler: An American Master* (New York: Smithmark, 1996), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Harborough Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde: To Be Used as a Supplement To and in Illustration of the Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1916), 244.

or admired them more than the others, but there was something about both of them more instantaneously individual and audacious than it is possible to describe”.<sup>22</sup> Terry was a muse for poets and painters of the time, including Wilde, who wrote sonnets for her after seeing her star as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Queen Henrietta Maria in the play *King Charles*.

The first and most prolific biographer of Wilde in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Robert Sherard, his friend and author of two books: *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1906) and *The Real Oscar Wilde: To Be Used as a Supplement to, and in Illustration of “The Life of Oscar Wilde”* (1917). In the second book he is characterized by Alfred Douglas as a journalist who “writes books on Oscar Wilde. He is always writing books on Oscar Wilde. He does nothing else. It is, I believe, his sole source of income”.<sup>23</sup> The two met in 1893 during Wilde's 3-month stay in Paris and he got attracted by Sherard's good looks and connections. Sherard dedicated his collection of poems *Whispers* (1884) to Wilde but denied any kind of platonic or actual love between the two, because he was said to be heterosexual. He was rather a worshipper and that flattered to Wilde.

Another important figure influencing the life of Oscar Wilde was the satirist Robert Smythe Hichens, best remembered from the “Naughty Nineties”, which is the name for the decadent era at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Green Carnation* (1894) he writes about the controversial relationship of Wilde and Alfred Douglas. Although names in the book were changed and it was supposed to be an innocent parody, it “made its small but noticeable contribution to the growing disfavour Wilde was encountering”.<sup>24</sup>

Robert “Robbie” Ross, with Robert Sherard, was one of those who stood by Oscar and remained loyal to him during the big scandal and after he was released from prison. Ross was his critic, mentor and an open homosexual, which caused him problems. Reportedly, he was the first lover of Wilde and though it was never confirmed, “he was Wilde's most intimate friend, who probably understood and

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<sup>22</sup> Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde*, 303.

<sup>23</sup> Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde*, vii (Foreword)

<sup>24</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 401.

sympathised with him more than anyone else”.<sup>25</sup> However, as he himself said to Frank Harris when Oscar was already dead, “he had never felt that Wilde really liked him”.<sup>26</sup>

After Wilde's death Robert Ross got rights to all his texts which meant that he either received them officially or had to search for them in black markets, since some of them had erotic content and therefore they were illegal. He later passed these rights onto Wilde's sons.

As Sherard states in *The Real Oscar Wilde: To be Used as a Supplement to, and in Illustration of “The Life of Oscar Wilde”*, Ross was holding Wilde's hand when he passed way: “I went to the bedside and held his hand, his pulse began to flutter. He heaved a deep sigh, the only natural one I had heard since I arrived, the limbs seemed to stretch involuntarily, the breathing became fainter, he passed at ten minutes to two exactly”.<sup>27</sup>

During his school times, Wilde got strongly impressed by an English essayist Walter Pater after reading his book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Few years later, Oscar described that it was “my golden book, I never travel anywhere without it. But it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written”.<sup>28</sup> Oscar met Pater personally and that was the turning point when he learned the doctrine of “art for art's sake”. He was taught to always try to write precisely and Pater became probably the greatest inspiration of his life. Knowing him helped Wilde to discover himself “through the voice and the words of the revealer”.<sup>29</sup> Later, Oscar Wilde paid a tribute to Pater in *The Critic as Artist*, published in 1891, where he develops his ideas about aestheticism. In return, Walter Pater said that “Wilde reached the highest point of perfection in *Dorian Gray*”.<sup>30</sup>

Another representative figure of Aestheticism was John Ruskin and Wilde looked to him for “spiritual guidance”.<sup>31</sup> He attended Ruskin's lectures in Florence, Italy where he learned about beauty and morality. Ruskin was very fond of beauty of nature and claimed that religion and morality are inseparable from the arts, saying that God

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<sup>25</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 179.

<sup>26</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 533.

<sup>27</sup> Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde*, 329-330.

<sup>28</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 47.

created the world and its beauty for our use and it should be filled with art which reveals the truth.

Frank Harris, a close friend of Wilde, might have predicted the consequences of his affair with Douglas: he had accused him of ruining Wilde's life long before the scandal was revealed. During the trials Wilde asked Harris to be a witness to declare that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) was not an immoral book. At the time, Harris frankly told him his opinion about the situation and foretold that it would all end in a disaster and that he should leave the country immediately. After imprisonment, when Wilde left to France, Harris, as well as Douglas, gave him a considerably large amount of money to get by. From time to time, these two tried to get him out of Paris and make him spend some time in the countryside.

One of the toughest opinions about Wilde is represented by the social critic Max Nordau. He is well-known for a 5-volume book *Degeneration* (1892) in which he analyses different authors such as Ibsen, Nietzsche and Wilde and the influence of *fin de siècle* (end of the century) on the degeneration of arts. Nordau claims that society and human beings themselves are degenerating and it can be seen in arts because our moral boundaries disappear and there is a strong presence of decadence in personal lives but also in works of authors. Moreover, living in big cities spoils characters and makes people shallow. He associates decadence with “diabolism and sadism”.<sup>32</sup>

Nordau finds Oscar Wilde egocentric and thinks that he exaggerates the importance of art. As to his clothes, Nordau thinks that it is “no indication of independence of character but rather from a purely anti-socialistic, ego-maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing to make a sensation”.<sup>33</sup> Nordau also thinks that “Wilde obtained, by his buffoon mummery, a notoriety in the whole Anglo-Saxon world that his poems and dramas would never have acquired for him. I have no reason to trouble myself about these, since they are feeble imitations of Rossetti and Swinburne, and of dreary inanity”.<sup>34</sup> When Wilde learned that he undesirably became a “protagonist” of *Degeneration*, he commented: “I quite agree with Dr Nordau's assertion that all men of genius are insane, but Dr Nordau forgets that all sane people are idiots”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 315.

<sup>33</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 321.

<sup>34</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 321.

<sup>35</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 517.

### 1.3. Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas

The dearest friend and lover of Oscar Wilde are the words that could be used to describe Alfred Douglas. Some may even call him a cause of Wilde's destruction; however, this matter should not be seen from one point of view.

Lord Alfred Douglas, also known as Bosie, was born in 1870 to a rich family: his father was John Douglas, the 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry who later strongly opposed to his friendship with Wilde.

The two met thanks to Douglas's interest in Wilde's work since he was a poet, too. They both attended Magdalen College in Oxford and they were introduced to each other by an American poet Lionel Johnson, who took Douglas to Wilde's house in the summer of 1891. Oscar was attracted by the young, charming and gifted poet with a title. On the other hand, Douglas was impressed by Wilde's personality and interesting talking. Even Constance liked Alfred, "she told him, about a year after their first meeting, that she preferred him to any of Oscar's other friends".<sup>36</sup>

When they were separated, Oscar would write "extravagant and poetic love-letters to his young friend".<sup>37</sup> When they had time to be together, they travelled to different places or stayed in the countryside with their common friends. Since Douglas was still a student, Oscar often visited Magdalen College, where he was popular among other students and called Master by them.

By early 1894 the friendship of theirs became a thorn in side of Lord Queensberry. He was trying to persuade his son, Lord Douglas, to stop seeing Oscar, which he refused. He started threatening them in different ways: by trying to cut off his son's allowance or by attempts to attack them in public. Soon he realized these threats were useless and decided to destroy Wilde in a legal way, saying that he will "teach the fellow to leave my son alone".<sup>38</sup> He wanted to show everyone how immoral Oscar Wilde was and his tactics were to dishonour him and spread rumours about his homosexuality.

In the beginning of March 1895 Wilde found a solicitor Travers Humphreys to protect him against Queensberry's "criminal libel" which started the great battle

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<sup>36</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 104.



between the two. Unfortunately, Wilde was surrounded by incompetent supporters. Even his close friends, such as Frank Harris and George Bernard Shaw, urged him to leave to France for good and save himself.

Although at the beginning people were rather in favour of the writer, since they were impressed by the poetic lines of the letters to Douglas which were read in the court, later documents connecting Wilde with several young men were revealed and that ruined him.

As he was asked more and more questions at the court, he lost his self-confidence. Witnesses were called to the court to talk against him and though Douglas was the only one who could possibly save him and he was willing to talk, Wilde wanted to keep him from pain and shame.

It is important to state that Oscar Wilde himself might have not realized the “immorality” of his affection towards Douglas. Once, talking in the court, he said that affection of an older man for a younger one was “deep spiritual affection that is as sure as it is perfect”.<sup>39</sup> He did not find it unnatural, in his opinion it was a misunderstood connection of the intellect of the older man and joy of life of the younger man; Oscar Wilde saw a lot of artistic spirit in their friendship.

It seems that even the highest authorities gave him several opportunities to flee but he never used them. He paid the highest price: not only was he dishonoured but denied and abandoned by many of his former friends, too. The scandal also influenced his career, since publishers refused to print his books and some of those which were already printed were withdrawn from circulation. The only two pieces which could not be abandoned because of their immense success were *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895); the controversy of their author was too attractive for people.

After the first short imprisonment in April 1895, there was a possibility to be bailed out for £3000 and Wilde escaped to his brother's house. At the time he was already feeling mentally bad and though he was repeatedly advised to go abroad (Douglas called him to join him in Calais), he refused. Wilde's mother and older brother Willie wanted him to stay and face the situation. Willie Wilde said that Oscar “is an Irish gentleman, and he will face the music”.<sup>40</sup> After three weeks of freedom, the

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<sup>39</sup> Thurston Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 128.

trials were renewed and eventually he was imprisoned for 2 years in May 1895. It is hard to say what was going on in Oscar Wilde's mind but we can suppose that to the last moment he believed in justice and in the fact that he would be acquitted.

#### 1.4. Marriage with Constance Lloyd

Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde were not the only two protagonists in the farce; the affair and its consequences affected Constance Wilde. What was her position?

Oscar and Constance met in 1881 but married only 3 years later. As already mentioned, she liked Douglas more than other friends of her husband.

Friends of the couple claimed that “Mrs. Wilde was a devoted wife to her husband”.<sup>41</sup> What she hid inside was a strength and depth of the character which allowed her to deal with the scandal quietly, not hysterically, as it would be expected from a woman.

The couple first met at a party of their mutual friends where they discovered how much they had in common; Constance was a writer herself and contributed to magazines occasionally. The next day after the party, Constance wrote a letter to her brother Otho, describing her impression of Wilde: “I can't help liking him, because when he's talking to me alone he's never a bit affected, and speaks naturally, excepting that he uses better language than most people”.<sup>42</sup>

Since she was from a well-off family, some of her relatives had suspicions that Wilde might have been interested in marrying her just for money, because at the time of their growing affection he was neither famous nor wealthy yet. Letters which Constance and Oscar wrote to their friends after getting engaged prove that it was not true. Constance wrote to her brother again, saying that she was “perfectly and insanely happy”,<sup>43</sup> while Wilde wrote to Lillie Langtry, actress and his friend, that he was going

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<sup>41</sup> Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde*, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Niel McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 24.

<sup>43</sup> Colm Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time: And Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 56.

to be married to a beautiful girl called Constance Lloyd, a grave, slight, violet-eyed, little Artemis".<sup>44</sup>

After marrying Constance, Wilde was not frequently seen in public with women (if so, they were his old friends), therefore no one accused him of anything immoral, at least not in terms of infidelity. It took some time until it was perceived that his friendship and inclination to Alfred Douglas meant something more, however, as Wilde defended himself: he did not see anything immoral in it, it was a pure and spiritual connection of two artists which common could people hardly understand.

When Oscar got into prison, she visited him only twice, not because they would not want to see each other more, but because they were not allowed to. She was not angry, she felt sorry for poor Oscar after seeing what imprisonment did to him.

Her relatives advised her to divorce him and get rid of the shame caused by her husband. She decided to leave England and move to Genoa, Switzerland instead. Moreover, she changed her and her sons' surname to Holland (inherited from her family) in order to become unknown and not connected to the scandalous writer. Their house and everything which was in it was sold for a song.

During the marriage she gave birth to two sons: Cyril (b. 1885) and Vyvyan (b. 1886), who later wrote an autobiography called *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954). According to Pearson, Oscar was not a family man and Constance was very well aware of it, however, when with children, he was a good and caring father. Not only did he entertain his sons, he was popular also with the children of his friends.<sup>45</sup>

However, because of his father's reputation, Vyvyan Wilde was denied to study at the University of Oxford. His older brother Cyril died relatively young in the First World War, Vyvyan worked as a translator and editor and died in 1967. Constance Wilde died at the age of 40 after two spinal operations in Genoa in 1898.

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<sup>44</sup> Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 184.

## 2. The Victorian Era and Society

The Victorian Era is named after the longest ruling queen of England, Victoria, who was in power since 1837 until her death in 1901, which covers the whole life of Oscar Wilde. It is not the only era named after a significant ruler – we know also the Georgian or Edwardian Era – but this one became a remarkable period of the English history.

It is associated with words such as prosperity, peace, increase of population, expansion of towns turning into cities, improving educational system and wealth. This all was achieved thanks to the agricultural and industrial revolutions, both starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and lasting until the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All positive changes resulted in “baby boom”, since people had more money and better life conditions to settle down and start families, often with more children.<sup>46</sup>

*The Elementary Education Act*, also known as the *Forster's Education Act* (1870) provided elementary education for all children from 5 to 13 years. It was passed not only to raise opportunities and life standard of the citizens but also to make them more aware of the political situation, since the *Second Reform Act* passed 3 years before, raised the number of voters in England and Wales. In overall, “the most marked changes of tendency in Victorian England may be ascribed to the later sixties and the seventies”.<sup>47</sup>

All these positive changes and development influenced also London. It was no longer only the capital of the kingdom; “late-Victorian London was being thought of more and more as a world city”.<sup>48</sup> Everything important – from business to cultural and social events – was happening there and who wanted to be in the centre of it, had to be in London. There were also tourists tempted to see London just because of what they heard or read, international travelling was increasing and celebration of two important jubilees of the queen (1887 and 1897) attracted even more visitors.

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<sup>46</sup> John Wolfe, *Religion in Victorian Britain: Culture and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 129-130.

<sup>47</sup> George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 564.

<sup>48</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Penguin, 1968), 317.

However, it seems the locals were not that keen on living in London. It became very big, crowded, criminality increased and not all its parts were attractive, especially not the quarters of the poorer working class families. Most of the people who made money in the city would settle down in the countryside: “from furnace to field, from ledger-book to coat of arms, from Sunday School for yourself to Public School for your children – all these were favourite Victorian modes of advancement”.<sup>49</sup> Some even claimed that living in big cities influenced religion in a wrong way and lowered morals. J.H. Ingraham, a popular religious novelist wrote that “Adam and Eve were created and placed in a garden; cities are the result of the fall”.<sup>50</sup>

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many Londoners of the upper class society resided part of a year in London, part a year in the country. It was so called *season* mentioned so many times in the plays of Oscar Wilde, when important and influential people worth knowing were throwing parties, dinners and balls which were good places to meet new people, present new spouses, learn the hottest rumours, boast with the expensive dress and jewelry. No one from the upper class would miss the *season* in London. After it, they went back to the countryside residences where they spent boring months.

Although society was becoming more modern and developed, certain air of aristocracy and haughtiness towards lower classes had not disappeared yet. As G.M. Trevelyan describes in his book *English Social History*, “ruling society was aristocratic till Queen Victoria's death and preserved the modes and rites of aristocracy. Conversation was not the casual thing it has now become, but was something of an art, in which competence conferred prestige. Also clubs were still in their hey-day, their waiting lists were lengthy, membership of the right ones was a stage in a career”.<sup>51</sup>

The Victorian era is also strongly associated to the question of morality and values worshipped by the society. The upper class, made of about 300 families with a wide lineage, wanted to continue their influence on the formation of the whole society. Any sexual talking or inappropriate clothes were taboo, as well as homosexuality. Honourable values were family life, obedience to law, devotion to hard work and responsibility and these were exactly the ones which made the United

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<sup>49</sup> Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 574.

Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland so powerful and flourishing.<sup>52</sup> The moral code in the royal family was even higher because both parents of Victoria's husband Prince Albert were involved in sexual scandals and ended up divorcing, therefore the royalty felt a strong must to clean themselves: “the seventies and eighties had been a period not only of large families but of puritanism in ethical and sexual ideas, qualified by the too frequent weakness of human nature in practise. Queen Victoria had put the example of her court on the side of the stricter code”.<sup>53</sup>

Talking about family life, it was one of the basic units of the Victorian society. Couples were usually matched according to their social status and wealth, love was a secondary factor. There were more children in one family than it is nowadays and the parents did their best to raise them in a good way. The popular common saying of those times was “spare the rod and spoil the child” which means that if a child did something wrong, parents punished them in order to get obedience and teach them good manners.

## **2.1. Status of Women**

### **2.1.1. Queen Victoria**

The Victorian era is significant also in terms of changing position of women in society. Firstly, the ruler was a woman and not only that; during her reign, the kingdom was prosperous and internationally recognized. Queen Victoria became a symbol of power and moral purity of the country.

Ironically, she did not rush into the marriage with Albert, who was her German cousin, although she was already a queen at the age of 18. She liked his education and found him suitable for a role of the queen's husband, but she did not want to hurry things. Eventually, it was her who proposed and they got married in February 1840, when Victoria was almost 21. Albert became not only her husband but also a counsellor and influence of her first years as a queen. In 21-year lasting marriage,

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Bayley, *Victorian Values: An Introduction* (Montreal: Dawson College, 2008), 146-147.

<sup>53</sup> Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 576.

Victoria gave birth to 9 children: 5 daughters and 4 sons and the first one, a princess Victoria was born 9 months after the wedding.

A couple of years before his death, Albert starting having stomach problems; however, it did not stop him from working and supporting his wife. When Victoria's mother died in March 1861, he took on most of her duties despite his own poor health condition. According to the contemporary diagnosis he died of typhoid fever later that year in the presence of his wife.

Victoria blamed herself for Albert's death and got into deep grief which lasted for the rest of her life. She disappeared from public for 3 years, which harmed the popularity of the monarchy and she got the nickname “the widow of Windsor”. In the following years, she relied on her personal servant John Brown and it is even said that she had an affair with him. Whether it was true or not, the fact is that Victoria was deeply in love with Albert and she wore only black clothes as a symbol of grief until her own death 40 years later.

### **2.1.2. Women of the Upper Class Society**

A scheme of a patriarchal marriage was firmly settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Men provided money and other properties they got thanks to work, heritage or regular allowances from their family and women were supposed to love them, give birth to as many children as possible and take care of the household. In case of the upper class families, they had maids and servants to do so, therefore women were only obliged to be representative in the society, learn a little bit of some languages, play a musical instrument and sing to amuse the guests. As already mentioned, love was not an assumption or a necessity when looking for a partner. Parents of girls wanted to marry them well to become financially secure for the rest of their lives, men were looking for a charming woman who would “fit” into their picture of an ideal life. Since sexuality was taboo in those times, an ideal woman was supposed to be decent, pure and mannered. While women were expected to have only one man in their life – a husband – men were accepted to have affairs with more women; this was partially caused by the fact that

men usually got married in their late twenties or thirties, however women did so in their early twenties.<sup>54</sup>

Any kind of sexual talking in public was not allowed, women who got involved with more men were automatically excluded. The Victorian sense for morality was reflected in all spheres of life; even if women wore trousers for horse-riding, they used to hide them under the dress, because wearing only trousers would not be acceptable.

The positive change in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the *Married Women's Property Act* from 1882 which let them own or inherit money and properties and sue and be sued in their own name. Meanwhile, first women's colleges were founded at Cambridge (1869) and Oxford (1879); “the demand for the political enfranchisement of women was the outcome of a very considerable degree of social enfranchisement already accomplished”.<sup>55</sup>

As to social interaction, women of the Victorian upper class society used to meet for lunch or tea, usually on a purpose to fundraise for charity and poorer citizens and host dinner parties with their husband and friends to keep the useful connections, however, they would not get involved with serious cases, neither did they have a word in making decisions.

### 3. Oscar Wilde's Plays: Settings and Similarities

Oscar Wilde wrote poems, essays, articles to magazines (e.g. *Women's World*), fairytales, the only scandalous and infamous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and plays, although first two – *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* – were not successful. As it has been already mentioned, he was also known as a leader of aestheticism and thanks to his extraordinary behaviour and unforgettable remarks on society he was well-known in the circles of London. The biggest success came with the plays written and performed in early 1890s, before his dramatic downfall.

All four plays – *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* have certain characteristics in common.

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<sup>54</sup> Lynn Abrams, “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain” *BBC History*.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml)

(accessed April 30, 2014)

<sup>55</sup> Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 565.



Not only are they set in the background of the upper society, there is always a certain misunderstanding or secret around which the plot revolves. That is caused by lies and hiding facts such as dark personal history of a protagonist as to their family life or career advance, questionable morals, their behaviour and such.

Moreover, there are always women involved in the plot which reveals some of the real life situations that could have happened in the Victorian upper society. While reading Wilde's plays, we can get a better knowledge of the behaviour of aristocrats, machineries in society and actual role of women.

Hesketh Pearson in his biography *The Life of Oscar Wilde* claims that Wilde “found it quite impossible to write a play during the fashionable season. All his plays were written when he was on holiday, and the names of the leading characters were usually taken from the places where he had stayed or in the neighbourhood”.<sup>56</sup> It usually took him less than month to finish a play and he used lots of dialogues he recalled from his own conversations.

As Dariusz Pestka explains, “the first three plays are on the surface extensions of sentimental drama based on the melodramatic pattern, but, in fact, their real issue is the attempt to rationalize the theme of the individualist's position in a conformist and hypocritical society”.<sup>57</sup>

All in all, one can say that what Oscar Wilde is trying to suggest is, that life would be so much easier, if we talked to each other straightly, leaving out the posh way of communication and obscuring. However, that was not possible because phenomena such as a mother who left her daughter and became excluded from the society (*Lady Windermere's Fan*), wealth and social status reached by a fraud (*An Ideal Husband*), or illegitimate son raised only by his mother (*A Woman of No Importance*) were not acceptable and could ruin lives back in the time. At least, the last play *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with a less serious problem when two main protagonists create their alter-egos, what also leads to a big misunderstanding, however with no serious consequences. On the other hand, in this play we can see superficiality of the female protagonists, who fall in love with Ernest just because of the name, the only right name for a man worth marrying.

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<sup>56</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 221.

<sup>57</sup> Dariusz Pestka, “A Typology of Oscar Wilde's Comic Devices” (paper presented at the Program on English Studies, University of Poznań), 1.

In plays of Oscar Wilde we can observe the dilemma of the protagonists when they face a situation of being uncovered: do they dare to admit their gaffes and risk the reputation they have or do they cover a lie with another one?

### 3.1. *Lady Windermere's Fan*

The first performance of the play was in St James's Theatre, London on 22 February 1892 and it launched the success of Wilde's plays, “nothing to compare with it had been seen on the English stage since Sheridan's *The School For Scandal* about 120 years before”.<sup>58</sup>

The plot takes one day in London and it is divided into 4 acts. The story revolves around a couple from upper society, Margaret and Arthur Windermere, who have been married for two years. Lady Windermere finds out that her husband has been recently seeing another woman. Moreover, the woman is much older, divorced and with a questionable past. Naturally, she thinks that her husband has an affair with her and tension culminates when Lord Windermere asks his wife to invite the woman to her party. Of course, Lady Windermere refuses and becomes very angry when the woman appears at the party anyway. The point is that the woman – Mrs Erlynne – is her mother, who had left her father for another man many years ago and that is the reason why she is not respected in the society. Her aim is to get closer to her daughter through her husband who knows about everything.

However, this little secret between Mrs Erlynne and Lord Windermere causes the main plot of the play. Lady Windermere is disappointed by her husband and ashamed of involuntarily hosting his “lover” at her own birthday party and so she starts thinking of running away with Lord Darlington who is very fond of her. The story culminates when she is almost unveiled by her own mistake of leaving her fan in Lord Darlington's house, where her husband sees it. In the end, Mrs Erlynne, who is also present, saves Lady Windermere by saying that she had not been in the house and it was her who accidentally took the fan. Although Margaret Windermere never finds out that Mrs Erlynne is her mother and Arthur Windermere never learns the truth about the night, thinking badly of Mrs Erlynne, the story ends happily.

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<sup>58</sup> Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 223.

To understand the circumstances and characters of the play, one must take into account the manners and habits of the Victorian Era mentioned in the previous part of the thesis.

The story takes place at the birthday party of one of the main female protagonists, Lady Margaret Windermere. It is full of posh aristocrats, hungry for a new scandal caused by the arrival of Mrs Erlynne. She and Lady Windermere are the two most important female protagonists. The analysis of their characters and behaviour illustrates thinking and status of a Victorian woman in the upper class society.

Margaret Windemere is a young and a little naïve woman saying that “we all have ideals in life. At least we all should have”.<sup>59</sup> She still does not know how the social machinery works; she represents an ideal woman with morals, no scandals and a husband whom she loves. She has well-defined opinions of what is and what is not good, claiming that she has “something of the puritan”<sup>60</sup> in her. When Lord Darlington tells her about a man who is meeting another woman behind his wife's back, she says, without knowing who he is talking about, that such a woman should never be forgiven, however adds, that neither the man deserves it. Lady Windermere supports same law for both sexes and thinks that if we had “hard and fast rules, we should find life much more simple”.<sup>61</sup>

This is a typical illustration of the Victorian strictness and judging of people without knowing all information, however what we can find interesting about opinions of Lady Windermere is, that though she is a very moral person, she expects equality of both sexes and wants men and women to be judged equally for their scandals.

We can be witnesses of how different situations can adjust behaviour and moral principles in case of Lady Windermere herself: while at the beginning she feels uncomfortable and finds it inappropriate to receive compliments from lord Darlington, eventually she starts thinking of running away with him after realizing that her husband might be cheating on her. It is a turning point in her behaviour because Lady Windermere stops seeing things only black and white and is willing to risk her own reputation by leaving her husband for another man, which was unthinkable at the time. Her naïveté can be perfectly seen when she expects Lord Darlington to be her friend and

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<sup>59</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition, 1997), 529.

<sup>60</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 489.

<sup>61</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 490.

stand by her, to which he replies: “Between men and women there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship, love, but not friendship”.<sup>62</sup> Although nowadays we might have a different opinion, it was unacceptable for two people of a different sex to be only friends. In the past a woman was supposed to be devoted only to her man and meet and talk to other men was a pure courtesy and a social rule. Lord Darlington is aware of the fact that if Lady Windermere escaped with him, she would be reprobate, therefore he is honest with her: “I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a great deal. They matter far too much”.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, Lady Windermere is very easily influenced by other people, thinking that they might know better, because they are older: she believes Duchess of Berwick more than her own husband and in the end she is even willing to trust Mrs Erlynne in order to save herself from the scandal that did not even have to happen.

Mrs Erlynne is the other important figure. The whole secret of her meetings with Lord Windermere is that she is a real mother of Margaret Windermere who had left the family for another lover many years ago. By doing so, she automatically excluded herself from the society and although at present nobody remembers her, the only important information is that she is divorced and that is enough for other people to disdain her. Lord Windermere tries to explain to his wife that all that Mrs Erlynne wants is to start all over and get back to the society, to which she replies: “If a woman really repents, she never wishes to return to the society that has made or seen her ruin”.<sup>64</sup>

Mrs Erlynne is aware of other people's opinion about her but it seems that it does not upset her. She is still a very confident, independent woman, showing her unconventionality when talking to other people at the party. Their aim is to make her feel uncomfortable and leave, however, in the end she is the one who makes other feel uncomfortable with her jovial and handsome way of talking.

She acts as a rather confident and strong person, though at the end, when talking to Lord Windermere about her daughter, she reveals the tragedy of her life for a moment. Anyway, in public she acts carefree and jovial and moreover, she shows her

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<sup>62</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 505.

<sup>63</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 506.

<sup>64</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 467.

wit when she resolves the situation with the Lady Windermere's forgotten fan so elegantly that everyone is happy at the end of the play.

In the play there are other female characters illustrating the superficiality of aristocrats, such as Duchess of Berwick. She is the one who comes to Margaret Windermere with the gossip about her husband and Mrs Erlynne, although she knows it does not have to be true, since she learned it from her cousins who are unreliable and, in the end, when the whole thing is explained she claims that she knew from the beginning that it could not be true.

The illustration of the superficiality and “two-facedness” is well shown in her words after meeting Lord Darlington: “What a charming, wicked creature! I like him so much. I'm quite delighted he's gone!”<sup>65</sup> After meeting Mr Hopper, a rich Australian, she is trying to be nice by saying that Australia “must be so pretty with all the dear little kangaroos flying about”<sup>66</sup>, however once she learns that he would like to marry her daughter Agatha and take her to Australia, her immediate reaction is: “To Australia? Oh, don't mention that dreadful vulgar place”.<sup>67</sup> Not only does she fake her interest in Australia, she shows a lack of knowledge when she assumes that kangaroos are flying animals.

To see the immense importance of the *season* when there was a biggest chance to find matches for single people, Duchess of Berwick talks about the “value” of affection between her daughter Agatha and Mr Hopper: “well, not love at first sight, but love at the end of the season, which is so much more satisfactory”.<sup>68</sup>

Duchess Berwick, in general, represents the old-fashioned lady of the upper society, chasing a good match for her daughter Agatha: at the Lady Windermere's party she uses a card for listing the names of men interested in dancing with her. Of course, Duchess is the one who decides and scratches out the names of those who she does not consider suitable for Agatha. She is also very sceptic towards men. When Lady Windermere, disappointed by the behaviour of her husband asks her if all men are bad, she replies: “Oh, all of them, my dear, all of them, without any exception, and they never grow any better. Men become old, but they never become good”.<sup>69</sup> She also

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<sup>65</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 492.

<sup>66</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 500.

<sup>67</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 507.

<sup>68</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 508.

<sup>69</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 493.

thinks that men would neglect their wives if they were completely idle: “our husbands would really forget our existence if we didn't nag at them from time to time, just to remind them that we have a perfect legal right to do so”.<sup>70</sup> According to Duchess Berwick it is acceptable of a woman to act annoyingly sometimes in order to compel their attention.

This character is not the only representing posh aristocrats; Lady Plymdale, another lady, comments on how society can possibly see an affectionate marriage in public: “It's most dangerous nowadays for a husband to pay any attention to his wife in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when they're alone. The world has grown so suspicious of nothing that looks like a happy married life”.<sup>71</sup>

The same lady continues talking about her own husband and too much attention he is giving her because “he has been so attentive lately that he has become a perfect nuisance”.<sup>72</sup> It seems that women cannot be satisfied: whether their husbands care for them or neglect them, everything can turn to be the subject of gossips.

However, women were not the only ones who liked to comment on other people's lives and behaviour. We meet male characters who are fond of it too; Mr Cecil Graham admits his favour for gossips and lack of morality: “Oh! Gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality”<sup>73</sup> or “my own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's”.<sup>74</sup>

Lord Windermere seems to be tired of his wife's denial of a woman with a questionable past; he is able to rise above the prejudices of the society and brings Mrs Erlynne to the party. In general we can say that also men like to talk other people's business, however they do not judge it so stridently.

According to Ellmann, the play was “enormously popular, touring the country for months, but largely trashed by conservative critics”.<sup>75</sup> Whether Wilde intended to bring up taboo topics or not is questioned by the critic Peter Raby: “It is sometimes suggested that this social comedy [*Lady Windermere's Fan*] and its successors *A Woman*

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<sup>70</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 491.

<sup>71</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 502.

<sup>72</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 505.

<sup>73</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 518.

<sup>74</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 516.

<sup>75</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 347.

of *No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* are of relatively slight significance, trifles tossed off by Wilde for purely commercial considerations and modelled, tongue in cheek, upon contemporary patterns with the intention of both flattering and mocking their fashionable audiences".<sup>76</sup> What Raby finds interesting about *Lady Windermere's Fan* are revelations that actually never happened, such as Lady Windermere's escape with Lord Darlington or disclosure of Mrs Erlynne's identity; the whole truth is told to the audience, however not to all characters. If we look at the play from this point of view, we realize that half of the plot is never explained to characters and Wilde controls them like puppets.

### 3.2. *A Woman of No Importance*

It is considered the weakest play of the four, mainly because of a quite boring beginning; Wilde reveals the main secret only in the second half of the second act, until then, there are only tedious conversations of the member of the upper class society, which can be interesting, yet they keep reader in the expectation of "something bigger".

However, *A Woman of No Importance* questions the moral and immoral behaviour of women in society and their actual importance and it also deals with double standards for men and women. To provide more opinions, Wilde offers us different characters representing various points of view.

The play was first performed on 19 April 1893 in Haymarket Theatre, London. It is divided into 4 acts and the story is set in the countryside, during the gathering at Hunstanton Chase and later in Mrs Arbuthnot's house in Wroclay.

Once again, the story is based on a secret between characters: Mrs Arbuthnot is a single mother in her 40s, whose son Gerald is to become a secretary of Lord Illingworth. It is a great opportunity in his career and though he does not have many qualifications, Lord thinks that he can make it. However, the mother of Gerald does not approve of the offer and no one understands why. Eventually, she tells Lord Illingworth that Gerald is his son and the result of their affair from the past. 20 years ago they were in love and Mrs Arbuthnot got pregnant, but Lord Illingworth refused to marry her. Now he feels sorry for abandoning the son and wishes even more to make him his

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81.

secretary to spend more time with him and teach him things useful for life. Mother, of course, continues begging her son to stay with her and turn down the offer. She questions her own morality and importance and puts her on a lower position than other women. She also blames Illingworth for destroying her youth, and feels hatred towards him.

The principal female characters of the play are Mrs Arbuthnot, Miss Hester Worsley and Mrs Allonby, additional ones are Lady Hunstanton, Lady Pontefract and Lady Stutfield.

Mrs Arbuthnot has excluded herself voluntarily from the society; she thinks that she should suffer for her mistakes from youth. She attends church regularly and refuses invitations to parties or other types of social gathering. The situation is paradoxical because ladies in the upper society, not knowing of her “sin”, find her a nice woman and always invite her to join them. We can observe a certain auto-criticism of the female protagonist who feels ashamed not because of other people, but because of herself.

When she is with others, she is very quiet and polite, however, in the private conversation with Lord Illingworth she shows her rancour and reproaches him for not taking a responsibility in the past saying that “when a man is old enough to do wrong he should be old enough to do right also”.<sup>77</sup>

The reason why she does not want to reveal the secret and marry Lord Illingworth after so many years is her opinion that “women are hard on each other”<sup>78</sup>, they do not help each other and judge roughly. She knows that if their secret was revealed, she would become inferior and shameful in eyes of her present friends.

Mrs Arbuthnot is a symbol of strength and independence of women as she managed to raise Gerald on her own, without any financial support of Lord Illingworth. Although she is now fed by hatred and rancour, she shows a great deal of responsibility and ability to fight with life difficulties as well. She is also an illustration of importance of women who bring up descendants and usually have a tighter relationship to children. By refusing Lord Illingworth's money, help or opportunities for the son, she actually turns him to be a man of no importance.

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<sup>77</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 562.

<sup>78</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 581.



On the other side, there is a character of Hester Worsley, a young American Puritan who represents very strong opinions about morality. She is prejudicial and thinks that American women are much better educated. In general, she considers the American society much more developed, with all men being equal. She also says that in America people do not disrespect other people who work, as Lady Caroline does when talking about Gerald: “In my young days, one never met anyone in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing”.<sup>79</sup>

According to Hester, English society is “shallow, selfish, foolish”<sup>80</sup>, she is not afraid to express her opinion despite the resentment she might cause. We can see a certain similarity with Lady Margaret Windermere: they are both young and have rather restricted opinions on society and morals. Hester represents the same idea of punishment for people who have sinned, not only women, but also men; she even says that the sin should be passed onto the children of the sinners, too, claiming that it is “God's law”.<sup>81</sup>

Later on, she even finds herself in a similar situation as Lady Margaret Windermere: when someone whom she likes is a sinner and should be punished, suddenly she sees things differently and changes her mind. The question is: does she judge differently because the case is connected to people close to her or is it a proof that people can change and their heart can become softer?

There are two minor female characters that are completely opposed: Mrs Allonby is characterized as “hardly a very suitable person”<sup>82</sup> by Lady Caroline Pontefract, mainly because they get into conflicts about various matters. When they discuss the importance of women, Mrs Allonby is opposed to Lady Caroline, who thinks that men are supposed to take care of their wives, saying that women are no one's property and do not belong to anyone, meanwhile men are property of women. It seems that according to her, women are superior to men, however, she actually envies them their position. Yet, she likes shocking other ladies with her unique opinions.

On the other hand, a relationship towards her husband is pretty odd, too. She describes him very superficially, considering his talk useless and dull. Mrs Allonby is an atypical Victorian woman: she is flirtatious, unconventional and carefree. She even

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<sup>79</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 538.

<sup>80</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 555.

<sup>81</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 572.

<sup>82</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 537.

encourages Lord Illingworth to kiss Hester Worsley just to see how the young Puritan would react.

Lady Caroline is a typical aristocrat, living in wealth without ever working for it. She thinks that men are supposed to take care of their wives and finds it scandalous, that so many men are single at the time. She constantly commands her own husband, thinking that she always knows better, and he listens to her only to make her shut up.

Lady Jane Hunstaton, the host of the gathering, is a rather nice person who is complimenting everyone. However, it seems that her talking is empty and she hardly knows how to react in conversations. Lady Stutfield thinks that “the world was made for men and not for women”<sup>83</sup>, however, she does not have a clue what to say in conversations; therefore she is always on the side of the majority. She does not have her own opinion and is easily influenced by others.

It is also interesting to observe how men in the play see women. Lord Illingworth emphasizes the role of women in the society as a companion of a man: “no man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him, and women rule society”<sup>84</sup>.

However, for him, women are just toys or a “picture” which is not to be analysed or understood, it is just supposed to be nice. The reason why men need women is that Victorian society is strict and the way how to gain respect and trust is to have a woman by one's side.

It is paradoxical, because Lord Illingworth himself is a bachelor and does not plan to marry. He thinks that because of marrying a person we love, the affection disappears: “One should always be in love. That is the reason why one should never marry”<sup>85</sup>.

On the other hand, there is Mr Kevil, a Member of Parliament, who thinks better of women. He is focused on purity and interested in poor people to whom he wants to help, unlike Lord Illingworth. He considers women the carriers of purity, morality and other noble virtues, does not think of them as of toys, but as “the intellectual helpmeet of a man in public as in private life”<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 540.

<sup>84</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 566.

<sup>85</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 567.

<sup>86</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 544.

The play was written for Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the manager of the Haymarket Theatre, where it was later premiered. Wilde contrasted the city surroundings of *Lady Windermere's Fan* with English countryside. Although the play was not that successful as the previous one, it was still written well.

However, Wilde himself did not seem so enthusiastic about it: "Plots are tedious. Anyone can invent them. Life is full of them... I took the plot of this play from *The Family Herald*, which took it – wisely, I feel, from my novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*".<sup>87</sup>

### **3.3. *An Ideal Husband***

The story was first performed on 3 January 1895 in Theatre Royal, Haymarket London. This time, Oscar Wilde deals with the expectations of women towards men. Since men are considered the stronger sex which has been superior for centuries, women have a natural tendency to look up to them and think of them as of honest, fair and principled.

The play *An Ideal Husband* proves that it is always not true; however, that does not mean that one error from the youth makes one a bad person. Women are supposed to learn that they should not expect that much, otherwise they might be disappointed.

The centre of the plot are intrigues and threats concerning social status and reputation of Sir Robert Chiltern, an under-secretary for foreign affairs. He is married to Lady Gertrude, who admires him in every way: he is honest, successful, rich and respectable. One day, they are throwing a dinner-party where Mrs Cheveley, an important figure in politics in Vienna appears and asks Robert Chiltern to support Britain's involvement in shares of Argentine scheme of building a canal. He is actually about to give a speech in the House of Commons about how this scheme is a swindle and they should not get involved, therefore he refuses her request. She starts blackmailing him with information about his past: 18 years ago, when he was only starting in politics, he disclosed a state secret about buying shares in Suez Canal to Baron Arnheim, who is now dead. In return of a favour, Baron, who earned lots of money in the business, gave some to Chiltern who managed to prosper and now is one

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<sup>87</sup> Raby, *Oscar Wilde*, 81.

of the richest men in London. After that, he wrote a letter to Baron to thank him for everything and that letter is now in possession of Mrs Cheveley, who threatens him to publish it in newspaper in order to destroy his career. Eventually, he agrees to support the idea.

Chiltern's wife does not understand why he changed his mind so suddenly and later that night she asks him to break off the promise he gave to Mrs Cheveley. He is too ashamed to reveal the secret from the past to his wife, so he sends a letter to Mrs Cheveley and informs her that he is not going to support the scheme, although he knows that the consequences will be catastrophic.

Next day, Mrs Cheveley visits the house again because she thinks that she had lost her brooch in there and since she is angry with Sir Robert and hates his wife Gertrude – with whom she attended the school – she decides to tell her the truth. Gertrude Chiltern is absolutely devastated and disappointed with her husband; she writes a letter saying “I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you.”<sup>88</sup> to Lord Goring, her husband's best friend. However, before she gets to his place, Mrs Cheveley visits Lord Goring's house and steal the letter.

Lord Goring is trying to help Robert Chiltern to save his reputation and uses the secret he knows about Mrs Cheveley to make her give him the compromising letter. The secret is connected to the brooch she had lost in the house of Lady Gertrude; it is actually not a brooch but a bracelet which Lord Goring gave to his cousin a long time ago and recognized it at the party. He knows that Mrs Cheveley stole it and tells her that he will not tell anyone, if she gives him the letter. She has no other option so she hands it to Lord Goring, who burns it.

However, Mrs Cheveley is not done yet: she has the letter which Lady Gertrude sent to Lord Goring and which could be understood in a wrong way if read by her husband. Mrs Cheveley sends the letter to Robert Chiltern to make him jealous and angry with his wife, however, when he gets it, he thinks that it was sent to him by Gertrude and feels happy that she has forgiven him.

In the end, Lord Goring, who is already 34 years old and his father Lord Caversham wants him to finally get married, proposes to the sister of his best friend Robert Chiltern and she happily agrees. The story ends with 2 happy couples and 2 reputations saved.

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<sup>88</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 634.

This play differs a lot from the others because the author not only portrays interpersonal relations but discusses things such as corruption and politics. Moreover, he suggests that women should not idolise their men so much, because it puts a lot of pressure on them and that they should not criticize men but support them in good and bad. On the other hand, he implies that not all respectable men in the upper class society gained their fortune and esteem by a “fair play”.

There are two main female characters in the play, who seem to be the complete opposite: while Lady Gertrude Chiltern is an honest and loving person popular in the society, Mrs Cheveley is an emotionless being who likes to manipulate people and tries to reach what she wants either by her physical appearance or intrigues. Moreover, these two hate each other which causes much tension in the play.

Lady Gertrude Chiltern embodies a new Victorian woman: educated, polite, engaged in politics, supportive. When two ladies, friends of hers, talk together at the party, one says that she comes there to be educated, to which, the other one replies that she “hates being educated” and the first one adds: “But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life”.<sup>89</sup> This situation illustrates that Gertrude Chiltern wants to make women be more engaged in public affairs.

She worships her husband and takes him as a model of morality, which, however turns out to be a burden in their marriage. Her flaw is that she is a too strict person and thinks that “one's past is what one is. According to her it is the only way by which people should be judged”<sup>90</sup>, but she does not realize that all people can be mistaken from time to time. She thinks that everyone should have certain principles which should not be altered by circumstances. Though she is interested in politics and her husband's career, she is not aware of machinations and “dirt” behind. During the play she understands what “mistakes” she has been doing in the marriage. She thinks that loving her husband so much is a good thing but eventually realizes that everyone has their faults and she must accept it.

Mrs Cheveley is praised by the male part of the society because she is an attractive woman involved in politics and business, however, under the nice surface there is a calculative woman who seems to respect men but she actually disdains them. She is an uncommon female character, because she does not care whether she is married or not, she only cares about business and wealth: “Oh! I don't care about the London

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<sup>89</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 593.

<sup>90</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 610.

season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them”.<sup>91</sup>

She also criticizes the exaggerated moralism in the society, stating that it will enlarge Robert Chiltern's shame: “Remember to what a point your puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man – now they crush him”.<sup>92</sup> Mrs Cheveley characterizes morality as “the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike”.<sup>93</sup>

Lady Markby, a friend of Lady Chiltern, represents the old-fashioned Victorian woman making negative remarks on women's education and their engagement in politics: “In my time, of course, we were taught not to understand anything. That was the old system, and wonderfully interesting it was. But modern women understand everything, I am told”.<sup>94</sup> She thinks than the fewer women know, the happier their marriage is; is ignorance bliss?

In the society, however, she is seen as “pleasant, kindly, popular woman”.<sup>95</sup> She is fond of Lady Chiltern and describes her as “a woman of the very high principles” however, since she does not like Lady Chiltern's progressivity and interest in politics, she finds her dinner-parties “rather dull sometimes”.<sup>96</sup>

Mabel Chiltern, a younger sister of Sir Chiltern is a “perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type”.<sup>97</sup> She is fond of Lord Goring, which is seen by everyone but him. She does not fill an important role in the play; however, she is witty and less serious than other characters. In the end, she says that she does not want Lord Goring to be an ideal husband. She looks like a dreamer, but eventually she is the most reasonable woman, not expecting miracles from her future husband.

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<sup>91</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 598.

<sup>92</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 606.

<sup>93</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 630.

<sup>94</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 627.

<sup>95</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 595.

<sup>96</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 608.

<sup>97</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 594.

When it comes to men and their view on women of the time, there are two main characters: Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring, and a minor one: Lord Caversham.

Sir Robert Chiltern reveals an important message of the play: women should not forget that their husbands are also human beings and can commit mistakes. They should be supportive so men would not feel afraid to confess their sins. Men are not to be women's idols, but counterparts. Robert Chiltern, essentially, is not a bad man; he just did a wrong thing when he was young, but he found it the right at the time: "Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. The god of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one must have wealth".<sup>98</sup> Now, when he faces a threat that all will be revealed, he realizes that he cannot talk to his wife, because it would be a huge disappointment. Adoration of Gertrude, which is at stake, seems to be a burden: "Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses".<sup>99</sup>

Lord Goring is a bachelor who likes enjoying life without a spouse next to him: he is a well-known bachelor of the society and one can say that he likes this status. It seems that he enjoys teasing women and attributes them a smaller importance: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambition".<sup>100</sup> It is a kind of ironic, since Lord Goring has no specific life goals, nor he is an important figure of the society: "he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?"<sup>101</sup> says Mabel Chiltern in defense of Lord Goring to his father, Lord Caversham.

Lord Goring likes Robert Chiltern's younger sister, however, during the whole play, their mutual affection is just a pure flirtation. In the past, he was engaged to Mrs Cheveley and now he finds it a foolish act of his youth. Eventually, after his father's jobation, he proposes to Mabel Chiltern.

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<sup>98</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 615.

<sup>99</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 631-632.

<sup>100</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 659.

<sup>101</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 594.

However, his main part in the play is being helpful to his best friend. He realizes very well, that once a person is marked with a scandal, they will be excluded from the society and explains it to Robert Chiltern: “You would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician.”<sup>102</sup> After he finds out the secret of his best friend, he tries to explain to Gertrude that she is too tough when it comes to some of her views on life.

Lord Caversham, an old gentleman, seems to be disappointed with an idle way of life his son leads. He constantly compares him to Robert Chiltern, who is a successful politician and moreover, he is married. Lord Caversham is trying to persuade his son to finally get married to give his life some sense, because “bachelors are not fashionable anymore. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them”.<sup>103</sup> He thinks that it is not even important to love someone before marriage: “there is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life”.<sup>104</sup> He puts women on inferior position which is shown in more statements such as “No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex”.<sup>105</sup>

The idea of being blackmailed over a compromising letter was taken from Oscar Wilde's real life: he had been blackmailed by Alfred Wood, among others, who later witnessed at the trial against him. Wood got letters which were originally addressed to Alfred Douglas. Oscar Wilde never paid any money to anyone who tried to blackmail him, however, he told them that he considered the price for a piece of his writing a compliment.

Critics have always compared Wilde's work to the work of other authors, possibly trying to find “inspiration” or, better said, a steal of ideas. After *An Ideal Husband* was released, they claimed that the incident with the diamond bracelet was suggested by Vitorien Sardou, a French dramatist, to which Wilde responded: “It does not occur in any Sardou's plays, and it was not in my play until less than ten days before production. Nobody else's work gives me any suggestion.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 618.

<sup>103</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 635.

<sup>104</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 638.

<sup>105</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 638.

<sup>106</sup> Raby, *Oscar Wilde*, 81.



In general, play was very well received by the audience. G.B. Shaw, Wilde's friend and a playwright himself commented it with the following words: "Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough Playwright. He plays with everything; with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre".<sup>107</sup>

### ***3.4. The Importance of Being Earnest***

The series of the successful plays was closed by *The Importance of Being Earnest* firstly performed in St James's Theatre in London on 14 February, 1895. This time, Oscar Wilde did not use a rather serious issue as a centre of the plot, as it was in the previous plays; instead, he wrote a somewhat funny play about what happens when people try to be someone else. To keep the similarity to the previous plays, it is also set among the people of the Victorian upper class society and shows how unimportant things, such as a name, can be important for women when choosing their husbands.

There are two main male characters that cause the whole chaos in the play: Algernon Moncrieff and John Worthing. The first one is a charming and carefree bachelor living in London, who, in order to escape from the boring surroundings of his relatives – especially his aunt, Lady Brecknell – makes up Mr. Bunbury: an old friend of his, living in the countryside who is often ill and requires Algernon's visits. Every time Algernon is fed up with London, he leaves for the countryside for a couple of days and has a perfect excuse to avoid social gatherings with Lady Brecknell.

His friend, Jack Worthing "upgraded" his game to a whole new level: not only he made up a brother, he actually lives as two people: Ernest in London and Uncle Jack in the countryside. There he has a young ward Cecily who is only 18 years old and therefore he acts like a responsible and serious Uncle. In London, not seen by Cecily, he is more jovial.

Ernest-Jack Worthing is in love with Algernon's first cousin Gwendolen Fairfax, who is, however, daughter of Lady Bracknell. Lady Bracknell is a very dominant, tough woman, hardly ever satisfied with anything and anyone. When Ernest-Jack proposes to Gwendolen, her mother immediately starts a series of questions and does not seem to be very impressed by the idea of him marrying her daughter. However, Gwendolen is

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<sup>107</sup> Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Routledge, 2003), 199.

fond of Ernest-Jack and one of the reasons is his name, which she finds very nice and suitable for her future husband.

Meanwhile, there is Algernon who becomes obsessed with the idea of meeting Cecily, which Ernest-Jack wants to avoid. However, Algernon takes advantage of the fact that Ernest (known in the city) is not known in the countryside and goes there. He meets Cecily and introduces himself as Ernest, the “lost” brother of Uncle Jack. Cecily is glad to finally meet him, because she had got engaged to him in her thoughts 3 months ago. Algernon is bewitched by her beauty and wit and actually proposes to her. Cecily accepts and adds that his name Ernest makes him the only person in the world she can love.

However, Ernest-Jack comes back to the countryside and is totally shocked by the fact that his “brother” is there, because he wanted to protect innocent Cecily from Algernon. There is no way to resolve the situation without unveiling the secret, so Ernest-Jack plays the game of Algernon. The problem arises, when Gwendolen appears in the countryside, too. Both men are gone at the moment and she meets Cecily. After a short polite conversation, they both found out they are engaged to Ernest, which causes a very unpleasant atmosphere.

When the two men come back to the house, they know that the situation must be clarified: however, they tell the ladies that everything they did was for them. Algernon claims to pretend to be a brother of Jack-Ernest just to have an opportunity to meet Cecily and Jack says to Gwendolen, that having an alter-ego was a way to escape to the city and meet her whenever he wants. Ladies are flattered that their suitors underwent such a deed for them and they are even willing to be baptised in order to be called Ernest.

Meanwhile, Lady Bracknell appears in the countryside to look for her daughter Gwendolyn. There she finds two couples who claim to be engaged and since she likes to decide about other people's business, she is irritated that she has no knowledge about it and no influence on it. When Algernon tells her that he proposed to Cecily, she examines her qualities and properties in order to decide whether she would be a suitable wife for her nephew. Eventually, she agrees and the only one who is against the marriage is her guardian: Ernest-Jack. He wants to exchange his permission for their marriage for Lady Bracknell's permission for him to marry Gwendolen. She is absolutely against it and is about to leave.

At the moment, Miss Prism, a governess of Miss Cecily, appears on the scene. Lady Bracknell recognizes her, since she used to work in their house and was responsible for the loss of a baby, Lady Bracknell's sister son. He was left in the the Victoria Station in a big black bag. Ernest-Jack brings the bag and Miss Prism confirms that it is the bag in which she had the baby. Eventually, it is revealed that Ernest-Jack Worthing is a lost nephew of Lady Bracknell and an older brother of Algernon. Now his Aunt is not against the marriage with Gwendolen anymore.

Moreover, he got his real name after his father and thanks to the Army Lists it is found out that he was Ernest. After all, Ernest-Jack was not lying that much about his life.

Through this play, Oscar Wilde is showing how minor things like a Christian name could influence issues such as choosing a life partner. Generally, he wants to show us that people of the Victorian upper class society were obsessed by material things and superficial values which they appreciated more than behaviour or personality of each being. Just because both Gwendolen and Cecily like the same name, Algernon and Ernest have to pretend to be someone else, because they know that ladies would lose their interest in them, if they revealed the truth. What seems kind of absurd nowadays for us, was found perfectly acceptable in the past.

The most significant female character in this play is Lady Bracknell: she represents old-fashioned, traditional upper class society woman. She likes to define what is good and bad, acceptable and not acceptable. When she learns that Ernest-Jack wants to marry Gwendolen, her reaction is very cold and lets him know that he is not on the "list of eligible young men"<sup>108</sup>, although she might add him there if he meets her requirements.

However, she does not think that a girl should get engaged to someone without her parents' consent: "When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself".<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 677.

<sup>109</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 677.

Afterwards she questions Jack-Ernest about his age, address, which she calls “unfashionable”, annual income and family background. When Jack-Ernest informs her that he is an orphan who was found and raised by an old gentleman Mr Thomas Cardew, instead of being sympathetic, she says: “I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the seasons is quite over”.<sup>110</sup> When she meets people, she evaluates them due to the criterion whether they are or are not known in the society: when she is inquiring information about Cecily, no names connected to her sound familiar to Lady Bracknell. However, when Ernest-Jack mentions that Cecily's family solicitors are the Markby, she is at least slightly satisfied: “Indeed I am told that one of the Mr Markby's is occasionally to be seen at dinner parties. So far I am satisfied”.<sup>111</sup>

Another important point is property and it is very interesting to see the machination beyond the matchmaking. We usually see mothers inquiring about financial situation of their daughters' suitors. However, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* we can see a new situation: Lady Bracknell inquires about Cecily's fortune before she lets Algernon marry her. Once she learns that Cecily is well-off, she finds her “a most attractive young lady”.<sup>112</sup>

Lady Bracknell's daughter Gwendolen is representative of a young lady of the upper class society with good manners and sophisticated behaviour. One of the things she likes about Ernest-Jack is his name as she says: “my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you”.<sup>113</sup> She gives the name too much importance, although it does not guarantee qualities of its holder. The reason she is so attracted to the name may be its similarity to the word *earnest*, meaning *sincere* or *serious*; in that case the name would perfectly fit into the highly moral society concerned with virtue and principles. She believes that such a man would never disappoint her or anyone else.

Although she opposes to her mother in the question of marrying Ernest-Jack, they are very similar. Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are both strong-minded,

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<sup>110</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 679.

<sup>111</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 708.

<sup>112</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 708.

<sup>113</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 675.

somewhat bossy and they always reach what they want. It seems that everything they do is calculated in advance, they usually do not get overawed easily in any kind of situation. Gwendolen also degrades a position of women: “How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us”.<sup>114</sup> It is somehow paradoxical that such a strong-minded and witty woman falls so easily for Jack-Ernest's lie about creating alter-ego to be able to see her more often in the city.

Cecily Cardew, the granddaughter of Mr Thomas Cardew is a ward of Ernest-Jack. She knows him as Uncle Jack who raises her to be a nice and educated lady and hires Miss Prism to teach Cecily. When Uncle Jack mentioned that he has a brother Ernest, Cecily made up her own image of Ernest in her mind and when she eventually meets “real” Ernest, she informs him of their engagement. The reason why she fell for him so easily was that she got attracted to the mysteriousness around his person: “Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a young brother who was very wicked and bad, you, of course, have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And, of course, a man who is much talked about is always very attractive”.<sup>115</sup>

Besides that, Cecily seems to be the counterpart of Gwendolen: she is representative of an innocent girl with romantic ideals and thoughts. She has been brought up in the countryside, out of the “claws” of the London society. Cecily keeps a diary, where she writes not only about real events and incidents, but also about those which never happened: such as her engagement to Ernest. She is very imaginative and kind of a dreamer.

It is interesting to observe the behaviour of Gwendolen and Cecily when they are confronted. At first, before the conflict about Ernest, they treat each other as best friends, however, we still can see a certain level of superiority Gwendolen is trying to have over Cecily as a woman coming from the city. Cecily keeps being a nice, polite girl.

However, when they find out that they are rather rivals in the chase for one man, their behaviour changes completely. Although they try to keep the neutral tone of conversation, Gwendolene gets biting. On the other hand, Cecily does not lag and

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<sup>114</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 706.

<sup>115</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 694.

retaliates against such behaviour. They have several remarks on each other and both are trying to take over the conversation. When Cecily mentions that from the hills one can see five counties, Gwendolen reacts haughtily: “Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds”. To that, Cecily sweetly replies: “I suppose that is why you live in town”.<sup>116</sup>

In the play we can observe many more illustration of this kind of behaviour: women are best friends until a man interferes, then they can be really hard on each other. However, if a man disappoints them, they get back together, forgetting the past: once Gwendolen and Cecily find out the truth about Jack and Algernon, they hug as if they wanted to protect each other and walk out of the house together.

In the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* we meet with male protagonists who are willing to risk a problem and play with the identity in order to get women they like. The reason why they both stick to the name Ernest has already been mentioned: Gwendolen and Cecily find it charming and cannot imagine marrying a man with another name. Oscar Wilde wants to imply the obsession of the upper class with unimportant and superficial matters.

In this play Wilde combines the environment of the city in the first act and the countryside in the rest of the play. As already mentioned, *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not bring up any scandalous secret from the upper class society, however, offers a reunion of two brothers, who, despite being friends, were not aware of their relation. As Peter Raby comments, “the perfection of the resolution has only one minor blemish, the fact that Algernon remains in need of re-christening, but this passes unnoticed in the theatre”.<sup>117</sup>

Majority of critics praised the play for its easy tone and funny moments, H.G. Wells calling it “one of the freshest comedies of the year”<sup>118</sup>, others, such as William Archer, found it empty, without the meaning.<sup>119</sup>

In overall, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is still probably the most well-known play of Oscar Wilde. A possible explanation for it is that, theatre visitors, not so acquainted with the Victorian Era and manners and morals of it, would not understand the fuss and secrecy of the protagonists of the previous plays. However, to enjoy *The*

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<sup>116</sup> Wilde, *The Collected Works*, 699.

<sup>117</sup> Raby, *Oscar Wilde*, 122.

<sup>118</sup> Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 188.

<sup>119</sup> Beckson, *Wilde: the Critical Heritage*, 189-190.

*Importance of Being Earnest*, which is based on double identity that causes funny complications and eventually ends happily, one does not need a profound knowledge of the time when the play was written.

### **Summary**

The aim of the thesis was to look at the plays of Oscar Wilde from a specific point of view. As a woman, I was interested in the perception of female human beings in the society which was still strongly male-based. Since the first time I read the plays, I realized that Wilde experimented with plots and made challenges of them. He gave women a lot of space in his plays for us to see that not all of them were stereotypical. However, his point was not to make only a positive or only a negative impression of women; he rather set them into various situations and gave examples of a typical and acceptable way of behaviour of the time, but also the exceptional and progressive ones.

The thesis was divided into three main parts: Oscar Wilde, the Victorian era and the plays. Each part then has more specialized sub-chapters.

In the first part concerning Oscar Wilde, there are five principal units: a brief biography mentioning his childhood, first influences and school years, eccentricity and extravagant clothing, friends and enemies, relationship with Alfred Douglas and marriage with Constance Lloyd. These serve as a brief introduction and characteristics of the author in order to understand the way he wrote, the topics he chose and the worldview he had.

Various biographies, memoirs and texts of Wilde's contemporaries, friends, admirers and critics were used in order to get as objective information as possible. Although this work intended to praise Wilde's writing talent, it did not want to omit unpleasant, though probably true information about him.

The second part of the thesis was more theoretical: it provides the basic introduction to the historical context of the Victorian era and explains the behaviour and everyday life of people at the time. It is important to understand what people, and upper class society above all, were like in order to understand the plots of the plays and reactions of the characters.

The subchapter deals with Queen Victoria, an important woman of the British history, whose reign is associated with prosperity and expansion. There is also a part dealing with women's position which was changing positively at the time.

The third part of the thesis was crucial, since it deals with the plays. The aim is to briefly outline the plot of each play and then more deeply analyse characters (mainly the female ones) and behaviour. There are many quotes from the plays used in order to illustrate various situations. The thesis also brings critics' views on each play. As already mentioned, Wilde's aim was not to claim that all women are only good and useful or bad and immoral. He set the female characters into various situations: in the first play, *The Lady Windermere's Fan*, there is a certain epiphany of Margaret Windermere, who realizes that rumours about a bad reputation do not necessarily mean that a person is actually bad; Mrs Erlynne turns out to be helpful, although she never has a chance to reveal the big secret to her daughter.

In the second play, *A Woman of No Importance*, which is in my opinion the strongest one in terms of the topic, Wilde indicates that men are not that important: Mrs Arbuthnot manages to get by on her own and brings up a son who is an honest and hard-working man.

Incorporating a character of a different nationality (in the case of *A Woman of No Importance*, a character from America which is so similar and so different from Britain at the same time) vivifies the play and offers a different point of view (Wilde lectured in America so it is possible that he got inspired by the everyday situations he faced there). What an American Puritan shares with a British "half-puritan" Lady Windermere is the moment of awakening when the world is no more black or white, good or bad, moral or immoral but the two start to judge society from more points of view.

The third play, *An Ideal Husband*, deals with the female attitudes towards men: this time, Wilde teaches us not to be so demanding when it comes to life of other people. However, we have to reconsider if woman were not so demanding and full of expectations in their relationships with men only because they could not fulfil their own ambitions. Although the position of female was improving at the time, they were still very limited as to their career and independence.

The fourth play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as already mentioned, is the lightest and the most refreshing one. Wilde gives us a serious topic, mixed with



moments and words of humour and decides to tell us what happens when two people play with the identities.

All in all, Wilde's plays could be studied from different points of view and there would always be something interesting to come up with. When it comes to the female protagonists in the plays of Oscar Wilde, he definitely did not let them be women of no importance.

## Resumé

Bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou 4 divadelních her irského dramatika Oscara Wildea, se zaměřením na ženské postavy: jejich pozice ve vyšší společnosti ve viktoriánské době, chování v souladu s očekáváním, nebo v rozporu s morálkou a hodnotami dané doby.

Celkově je práce rozdělena na tři hlavní okruhy. První se zabývá autorem, jeho životem, lidmi kolem něho, kteří ho ovlivnili, manželstvím s Constance Lloyd a údajným vztahem s Alfredem Douglasem. V práci jsem čerpala z několika na sobě nezávislých zdrojů, abych co nejlépe vystihla pravou tvář Oscara Wildea, je-li to vůbec možné. Pochopení jeho osobnosti bylo důležité pro pochopení jeho výjimečnosti a nezařaditelnosti do dané doby, která byla pod silným vlivem morálky.

Druhá část práce se zabývá právě tímto aspektem: charakterizace a pochopení viktoriánské společnosti, především ve vyšších kruzích, důležité hodnoty a pravidla společenského chování, které nám pak pomůžou lépe zhodnotit, co je ve hrách Oscara Wildea „dobré“ a co „zlé, nemorální“. Bez téhle části práce bychom mohli analyzovat jeho hry zcela zbytečně, protože některé jevy nebo názory ženských postav by nám přišly přirozené, bez toho abychom si uvědomili, že v dané době tak vnímány nebyly.

Poslední část práce se věnuje samotnému rozboru her, charakterizaci hlavních i vedlejších ženských postav, hodnotí jejich chování a reakce v daném kontextu a zápletky. K lepší ilustraci jsou použity citace, které o postavách mnohé napoví. Kromě toho se rozbor týká i mužských postav, a to zejména jejich názorů a vnímání žen v společnosti.

Cílem Oscara Wildea nebylo vykreslit ženy v jeho hrách jenom jako dobré, nebo jenom špatné, ale především poukázat na jejich vnímání společnosti, reakce v krizových situacích a jejich (ne)závislost na mužích.

## **Anotace**

Jméno: Natália Kováčová

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Studijní obor: anglická filologie – portugalská filologie

Název: Postavení žen z vyšší vrstvy viktoriánské společnosti a jejich zobrazení v tvorbě Oscara Wildea

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Matthew Sweney, Ph.D.

Počet znaků (včetně mezer): 96 041

Počet titulů použité literatury: 22

Anotace v ČJ: Práce se zabývá analýzou čtyř divadelních her irského dramatika Oscara Wildea z prostředí vyšší vrstvy viktoriánské společnosti na konci 19. století a zaměřuje se na postavení a chování žen. Na základě sociálního a historického kontextu dané doby je cílem práce zjistit, jestli bylo v souladě s očekáváním, a nebo se lišilo a jak.

Klíčová slova v ČJ: Oscar Wilde – viktoriánská společnost – chování – ženy – vyšší vrstva – divadelní hry

Abstract: The thesis analyses four plays of the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde set in the Victorian upper class society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and puts the emphasis on the women, their status and behaviour. The aim of the thesis is, according to the social and historical context of the time, to find out whether it met expectations or it differed and how.

Key Words: Oscar Wilde – Victorian society – behaviour – women – upper class - plays

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