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Criticism of Victorian Society in Oscar Wilde's Comedies

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Studentka se ve své bakalářské práci zaměří na období viktoriánské Anglie a společenskou kritiku ve zvolených satirických hrách Oscara Wilda. Autorka se nejprve zaměří na charakteristiku viktoriánského období, soudobé společenské situace, kulturního zázemí i hodnot, kterými se tato společnost řídila. Dále uvede zvoleného autora a jeho díla do dobového literárního kontextu. Následně provede analýzu společenské kritiky ve vybraných Wildových satirických komediích. Studentka vytvoří analytický akademický text založený na dostatečném množství kvalitních primárních a sekundárních zdrojů.

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ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis focuses on criticism of Victorian society in Oscar Wilde's comedies *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. At first, the thesis provides the historical background of the Victorian period. Secondly, the socio-cultural background deals with the elaborate class system and description of individual social classes. Then, the selected comedies are put into the literary context, which includes also their classification. Finally, the analysis is focused on the criticism of Victorian conventions and morality of the upper class, members of which predominate in the selected plays.

KEY WORDS

Victorian period, Hypocrisy, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde

NÁZEV

Kritika viktoriánské společnosti v komediích Oscara Wildea

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na kritiku viktoriánské společnosti v komediích *Ideální manžel* a *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* od Oscara Wildea. Práce nejprve charakterizuje historické pozadí viktoriánského období. Společensko-kulturní pozadí se následně zabývá třídním systémem a podrobným popisem jednotlivých sociálních tříd. Komédie jsou dále zasazeny do literárního kontextu, který, mimo jiné, obě zvolená díla klasifikuje. Analýza se soustřeďuje na kritiku viktoriánských konvencí a morálku nejvyšší společenské třídy, jejíž představitelé ve zvolených hrách tvoří drtivou většinu postav.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Viktoriánské období, pokrytectví, *Ideální manžel*, *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*, Oscar Wilde

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era was one of the most significant periods in history of the Great Britain. It was very long and it was a period of transition. Over the sixty-three years of Queen Victoria's reign, Britain underwent a revolution. However, it involved rather industrial, technological, scientific, commercial, and social development than military force. Naturally, these changes affected almost every feature of daily existence. Moreover, by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, the modern world had taken shape.

Nevertheless, that was not the whole picture of the age. The Victorian society was governed by a set of strict moral rules, rigid code of manner, and elaborate etiquette. This oppression, in fact, encouraged people's fear of visibly failing to live to their standards, and therefore they often acted hypocritically. The purpose of the thesis is to analyse this negative feature of the Victorian society, which was strongly criticized by Oscar Wilde in his plays. For the analysis, Wilde's timeless comedies *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* were selected.

The bachelor thesis is organised in four parts—the historical background, socio-cultural background, literary context, and analytical part focused on criticism of the Victorian society in the selected works by Oscar Wilde. The first chapter explores the notable historical events of the Victorian period and their impact on people's everyday lives. It covers the spheres of Britain as the workshop of the world, politics and reforms, industrial and scientific progress, and the British Empire. The subject of the second chapter is the elaborate social class system, which represents one of the most distinctive features of the Victorian society—pertaining to a social class. The increased emphasis is put on the upper class, members of which are the most numerous in the selected works. It should be noted that in the aforementioned chapters, theoretical information is directly contrasted to the examples found in the books. The third chapter deals with the literary background of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, including their successful production as well as criticism, their classification, and brief information about Oscar Wilde as an author and leader of the Aesthetic Movement, principles of which are also reflected in the plays. The fourth chapter analyses the Victorian society, and the main focus is on the conventions and upper-class morality.

1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Probably all literary works are to some extent influenced by the period in which they are written. It is, therefore, necessary to introduce the historical background of the Victorian period during which the two selected works—*An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*—were written, published and produced.

At first, a brief description of Britain as the workshop of the world is provided. Secondly, the impact of the Industrial Revolution and political reforms which helped to improve particular problems are pointed out. Then, technological and scientific progress of the age is mentioned. Finally, the British Empire and colonialism is discussed. At the same time, the aforementioned points are concisely contrasted with the events reflected in the selected plays by Oscar Wilde.

According to McDowall, Britain in the Victorian period was at its most powerful and self-confident. Indeed, after the Industrial Revolution, it was the “workshop” of the world.¹ Dargie states that thanks to pioneering technology, an abundant supply of coal, water, iron and rising demand in its domestic and colonial markets, “Britain raced ahead of its European competitors,” and its products dominated the world’s markets.² Burns agrees that the British Empire under Queen Victoria, the longest-reigning monarch in British history, “was at its zenith of power and prestige.”³ As Mitchell explains in her book, Victoria became queen on 20th June, 1837, when she inherited the throne after the death of her uncle, William IV. And even though the monarch’s actual powers were distinctly limited, continues Mitchell, the young queen showed a deep interest in the affairs of state and used her public role to exert personal and moral influence.⁴ She was also largely responsible for creating the “family of nations,” later known as the Commonwealth, as Guy notes. Guy further claims that Victoria had not been universally accepted throughout her reign. As a matter of fact, “many had not welcomed her to the throne, but by the time of her Golden Jubilee in 1887 she was at the height of her popularity.” Furthermore, by the end of her reign, continues Guy, she ruled the

¹ David McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 131.

² Richard Dargie, *The History of Britain* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2007), 150.

³ William E. Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 154.

⁴ Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2009), 4-5.

largest empire that the world had ever seen.⁵ However, it is important to point out that the benefits of this enormous success were concentrated predominantly among the upper classes, and the quality of life for ordinary people improved rather slowly, Burns suggests.⁶

In fact, the Industrial Revolution led to massive social changes, especially in the growth of urbanization and new forms of labour, as Burns highlights.⁷ Mitchell enriches Burns point by stating that urbanization, with towns and cities growing by mass migration of rural people who moved there to find work in the factories, was the most remarkable phenomenon of the Victorian age.⁸ Moreover, as Guy emphasizes, at the beginning of Victoria's reign only about twenty percent of the population lived in towns and cities, but by 1901, when she died, this figure had risen to about seventy-five percent. In addition to that, during this period the population of Britain doubled from around twenty million to forty million.⁹ In other words, Britain transformed from a mainly agricultural nation into an industrial one. As Schomp contends, on the one hand, the growth of cities meant more jobs, opportunities and variety in the lives of the Britons, but at the same time, it brought a lot of problems because towns and cities were unprepared for the dramatic increases in population and industry.¹⁰ The main problems the British people had to confront will be specified in the following paragraphs.

To start with, the need for cheap housing close to the factories, remarks Dargie, meant that accommodation for industrial workers was built as quickly as possible and densely packed. What is more, fresh water and adequate drainage were seldom provided, so many streets were even less hygienic than a medieval village.¹¹ In short, the towns and cities were overcrowded, polluted, smelly, and unhealthy. As Dargie further points out, in these conditions, diseases such as typhoid, cholera and tuberculosis were common, and soon spread to the districts where the rich lived.¹² Guy supports Dargie's claim by asserting that among unfortunate typhoid victims was even Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, who contracted in 1861 and died at the age of 42.¹³ In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring comments on this working-class difficulty as follows: "Extraordinary thing about the lower class in

⁵ John Guy, *Victoria* (Tunbridge Wells: Ticktock Publishing, 1998), 19, 28.

⁶ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 125.

⁷ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 145.

⁸ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 28.

⁹ John Guy, *Victorian Life* (Tunbridge Wells: Ticktock Publishing, 1997), 4.

¹⁰ Virginia Schomp, *The City (Life in Victorian England)* (New York: Benchmark Books, 2011), 13-14.

¹¹ Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 159.

¹² Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 159.

¹³ Guy, *Victoria*, 5.

England—they are always losing their relations.”¹⁴ Thus it proves the high mortality among the lower classes, particularly the factory workers who were forced to live in dreadful, unhealthy conditions.

Secondly, as Burns states, many factory owners forced workers to work long hours in appalling conditions, paid them the lowest possible wage, and prevented them from organizing to better their conditions.¹⁵ Nevertheless, perhaps the darkest shadow to have fallen over the Victorian era, argues Hughes, was the harsh and inhumane treatment of the working-class women and children.¹⁶ To be more specific, women had to perform the same arduous tasks as men at work but for much less pay, explains Guy,¹⁷ and children as young as five were ordinarily employed in mines, workshops, and factories, Schomp adds.¹⁸ As McDowall suitably sums it up: “while the British called Africa “the dark continent,” areas of possibly greater “darkness” were just down the road to their own towns.”¹⁹ Surprisingly, when the truth about capitalist exploitation of the working-class people, including children, had been uncovered, observes Hughes, they were often met with disbelief or, worse, with complacency from the upper-class society who lived in a completely different world.²⁰ To illustrate this fact, when *An Ideal Husband*’s Lord Goring decides to change his buttonhole, he is not satisfied with the new one: “For the future a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings.”²¹ Phipps, his butler, explains him that it is probably because of the florist’s sadness owing to loss she has had in her family lately. Nonetheless, Lord Goring shows no sympathy for her. Instead, he starts examining his appearance in the mirror and worries about looking “a little bit old” with the less trivial flower.²² He thus proves to be a self-centred nobleman who does not care about problems of the lower classes. Furthermore, the moment *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Algernon Moncrieff tells Lady Bracknell, his aunt, that due to illness of his invalid friend Bunbury, who immediately needs his help, he has to give up dining with her and her guests in the evening, Lady Bracknell gets deeply irritated:

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 46.

¹⁵ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 145.

¹⁶ Kristine Hughes, *The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England from 1811-1901* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Book, 1998), 115.

¹⁷ Guy, *Victorian Life*, 23.

¹⁸ Schomp, *The City*, 61.

¹⁹ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 155.

²⁰ Hughes, *The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England*, 117.

²¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 46.

²² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 46.

absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. [...] I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, for me, to be kind enough, not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me.²³

It implies that snobbish Lady Bracknell, too, lacks understanding towards people who are below her on the social scale. On the top of that, she feels no sympathy for ill people and invalids because from her point of view: “health is the primary duty of life, and illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others,” as she further adds.²⁴

According to McDowall, in the middle of the nineteenth century both working and living conditions began to improve.²⁵ At first, Acts in 1847 and 1850 limited the working day for all factory workers to 10 hours and made Saturday afternoons into a holiday, as Dargie asserts.²⁶ What is more, The Public Health Act of 1848, claims Mitchell, created agencies that started many new programs. As a consequence, over the next thirty years sewers were built; clean water was supplied; building codes required ventilation and reduced overcrowding; towns were required to provide regular garbage collection; factory inspectors began to study occupational diseases; and school health examinations were begun. One of the most significant legislative accomplishments of the Victorian age, continues Mitchell, was also a series of Education Acts in 1870 and 1891 which set up government-supported schools and required that elementary education be available to every child in Britain.²⁷ Besides, in 1871 trade unions were legalised, giving the workers a powerful instrument in their struggle for better wages and working conditions, as Schomp remarks.²⁸ Moreover, according to Burns, the Second Reform Bill in 1867 and the Third Reform Bill in 1884 further extended the parliamentary franchise, although it remained restricted to males, so in 1884, most urban men were given the vote.²⁹ Another thing is that the property qualification for service in the House of Commons had been removed, notes Mitchell, which meant that working men could now be elected as well. Finally, by the last year of Victoria’s reign, children under twelve could not be employed in any mine, workshop, or factory. They could still work, but only part-time, in retail trades, domestic service, and agriculture, as Mitchell clarifies it.³⁰

²³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: Methuen, 1957), 15.

²⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 15.

²⁵ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 140.

²⁶ Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 158-159.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 11, 213-214.

²⁸ Schomp, *The City*, 70.

²⁹ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 151.

³⁰ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 14, 43.

Furthermore, Burns claims that the working-class challenge was paralleled by the women issue. Besides the exploitation of working-class women in the factories, middle- and upper-class women in the Victorian period also experienced many disadvantages—they could not be educated to the same level as men; they were not allowed to participate in the institutions of electoral politics; a married woman could not possess property in her own name, for her property was considered that of her husband; and if a woman was stuck in a disastrous marriage, divorce was very difficult.³¹ McDowall supports Burn’s claim by writing that the husband and wife were one, and the husband was that one.³² In brief, women in the Victorian world had very little power and had to fight hard for the change they called for in their lives. As a result, in the mid-nineteenth century, observes Schomp, “some female charity workers turned their attention to their own concerns, giving rise to the women’s rights movement.” These early feminists demanded not only higher wages and better working conditions for working-class women, but also better educational and employment opportunities for middle-class women and greater legal and political rights for women of all classes.³³ *An Ideal Husband’s* Lady Chiltern, too, makes efforts to improve women’s conditions and extend their rights. Therefore, she participates in Woman’s Liberal Association which deals with “useful, delightful things, Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours’ Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise, etc.”³⁴ And the fact that all participants of this Association take their job seriously is supported by Lady Chiltern’s explanation to Lord Goring: “We have much more important work to do than look at each other’s bonnets.”³⁵ Importantly, their efforts gradually led to improvements in women’s status, as Schomp highlights.³⁶ For example, girls’ education underwent reform which enabled upper- and middle-class girls, who had been educated solely at home, to attend newly established high schools and academic schools. Women’s colleges were built also in Oxford and Cambridge, and those who had attended a good high school were later well prepared to take the Oxford or Cambridge Local Examinations, although the universities did not award degrees to women until after World War I, as Mitchell argues.³⁷ It implies that thanks to new academic schools and other institutions for girls, education was no longer a privilege reserved for upper-class

³¹ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 171.

³² McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 137.

³³ Schomp, *The City*, 52.

³⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 31.

³⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 31.

³⁶ Schomp, *The City*, 52.

³⁷ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 187, 192.

boys and men. What is more, Schomp emphasizes that even though women did not gain the right to vote in parliamentary elections until 1918, the final years of the Victorian era brought laws allowing them to serve on school boards and other local government agencies and to vote in local elections.³⁸ Besides, according to Nelson, the Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 allowed them to control their own earnings, savings and property,³⁹ and the Divorce Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 provided easier access to divorce for the rich as well as the poor, as Gillis claims.⁴⁰

Concerning the upper class, it should be mentioned that the landed aristocracy and gentry, although still a formidable group at the end of the Victorian age, had distinctly waned in power economically and politically, Burns argues. It stemmed mainly from the growth of cities, where landowners did not have the same influence they did over rural population, and from the Reform Acts which broadened the parliamentary franchise to include many more poor and working-class men. Moreover, as Burns observes, the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century was also exceedingly hard on landowners.⁴¹ Mitchell contends that it was caused by a series of bad harvests in Britain, while North American railroads and steamships brought plentiful wheat that was cheaper than English grain. Thus, English agriculture obviously could no longer compete. As a result, continues Mitchell, aristocrats and landed gentry who depended on rent from their land became less prosperous unless they found other sources of investment.⁴² This crisis is referenced to in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Lady Bracknell: “[...] land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That is all that can be said about it.”⁴³ In addition, Jack, having conversation with Lady Bracknell, enriches her point by asserting that: “The poachers are the only people who make anything out of it [land].”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Cecily Cardew notices that the agricultural depression is the subject of dramatic newspaper reporting, and she adds: “I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them [...]”⁴⁵ In short, it seems that even though the

³⁸ Schomp, *The City*, 70.

³⁹ Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), 9.

⁴⁰ John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse (British Marriages, 1600 to the Present)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 216.

⁴¹ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 162.

⁴² Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 13.

⁴³ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 21.

⁴⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 21.

⁴⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 78.

ladies and gentlemen of the propertied class preserved their separate cultural identity, they were no longer unquestioned leaders of society.

Throughout the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is impossible not to notice the significance of the railway in characters' lives. Especially for Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff the railway is crucially important because they both regularly travel from the city to the country and the other way around. What is more, Jack, as a baby, was found in the cloak-room in the Victorian station, and his founder, Mr. Thomas Cardew, named him after a first-class ticket for Worthing.⁴⁶ Clearly, the railway and other industrial advancements dramatically changed the conditions of people's daily lives and therefore will be further discussed.

McDowall emphasizes that the railway system was the greatest example of Britain's industrial power. Indeed, it was mainly because of this new means of transport that six million people could visit the Great Exhibition of the Industries of All Nations of 1851, which aimed to show the world the greatness of Britain's industry and its global dominance.⁴⁷ As Schomp points out, before coming of the railways, long-distance travel had been restricted to those who could afford private carriages or purchase fares on public stagecoaches, whereas train travel was for everyone, for "every railroad was required by law to run at least one low-fare train a day, charging passengers no more than a penny a mile."⁴⁸ According to Guy, the railway infrastructure itself grew from about 3,200 kilometres at the beginning of Victoria's reign to more than 22,000 kilometres by 1870,⁴⁹ and over 400 million passengers were carried annually, Dargie adds. In fact, the railway system was a powerful unifying force throughout Britain because it established one shared national time and provided reliable distribution for all kinds of industrial and commercial products, particularly perishable goods, the post, and national newspapers, as Dargie highlights.⁵⁰

Another important fact that should be noted is that "the Victorians virtually invented mass literature." Mitchell further explains that high-speed presses, cheap wood-pulp paper, machines for typesetting, new ways of reproducing illustrations, railways to send printed material fast all over the country, and the steadily growing number of people who were literate enough to read for pleasure supported the publication of newspapers and magazines at

⁴⁶ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 22-23.

⁴⁷ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 138.

⁴⁸ Schomp, *The City*, 12.

⁴⁹ Guy, *Victoria*, 17.

⁵⁰ Dargie, *A History of Britain*, 155.

every price and for every taste.⁵¹ In 1841, observes Dargie, one third of British people were unable to read and sign their marriage certificate, but by 1900, increased literacy encouraged a national press that reached most sections of British society. To be more precise, by 1900, there were thirty-two daily newspapers in London alone, reporting on matters of all kinds, Dargie adds.⁵² Hughes suggests that those were *The Times*, *Illustrated London News*, *News of the World*, *Morning Post*, *Moring Chronicle*, *Evening Mail*, *Evening Chronicle*, *Britannia*, *The Observer*, or *Court Journal*, to name a few. One of the most read were *The Times*, which reported parliamentary and other significant news and hence was essential reading for powerful men, who tended to read the paper at their office or club, as Mitchell contends.⁵³ Another use of the newspapers, although rather amusing, is introduced in *An Ideal Husband* by Lady Markby: “And then the eldest son has quarrelled with his father, and it is said that when they meet at the club Lord Brancaster always hides himself behind the money article in *The Times*. However, I believe that is quite a common occurrence nowadays.”⁵⁴ Naturally, this was a matter of the leisured class because people who worked for a living evidently did not have time to sit around in the club. Moreover, newspapers were expensive, continues Mitchell, which made them a luxury that only the wealthy could afford. However, as stamp duty was repealed in 1855 and production costs dropped, and as the newspaper tax was abolished in 1861, newspapers became much cheaper and more widely read.⁵⁵ In addition, Hughes points out that books were also very expensive and were considered luxuries. Therefore, it was a symbol of wealth and prestige for a private household to include a library, the shelves well stocked with leather-bound volumes,⁵⁶ like those at Lord Goring’s home in *An Ideal Husband* or in Jack Worthing’s country house in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Apart from *The Times*, there appears a variety of printed matter in the selected works. To be more specific, Cecily Cardew, Jack’s ward, claims that her engagement will be chronicled in their little county newspaper whereas Gwendolen Fairfax, Lady Bracknell’s daughter, boasts about her engagement being announced in the *Morning Post*. Gwendolen also regularly reads the more expensive monthly magazines, for, as she remarks, “one should always have something sensational to read in the train.”⁵⁷ In contrast, to her mother this

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 237-238.

⁵² Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 164.

⁵³ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 241.

⁵⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 40.

⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 241.

⁵⁶ Hughes, *The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England*, 128-129.

⁵⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 16, 76.

sensational reading matter means solely the court guides and etiquette manuals, which she worships. Furthermore, Jack Worthing has an extensive library of which he mentions, for instance, the Army Lists, “History of our own times,” “Green Carnation,” and several train timetables.⁵⁸ Besides, Cecily is forced to study Political Economy, German grammar, and other “improving books,” as her governess, Miss Prism, calls them.⁵⁹ In other words, it implies that literature played a prominent role in the lives of the upper-class members, especially the court guides and etiquette manuals which advised them whom to marry and how to behave correctly, and newspapers that supplied the noblemen with latest parliamentary, financial, and social news.

Importantly, Guy stresses that the speed at which new discoveries and inventions appeared in Victorian Britain was astonishing, and that they changed the way people had been living almost overnight. Among other breakthroughs, continues Guy, the first camera was developed by William Fox Talbot in 1839; London Metropolitan underground trains began operating in 1863; the first electric bulbs were patented in 1879 by American inventor Thomas Alva Edison, who, in 1877, also invented the phonograph; and the telephone was demonstrated in 1876 by another American, Alexander Graham Bell.⁶⁰ Moreover, Dargie writes that the first transatlantic telegraph cable from London to America was laid in 1866, and in 1901, it was possible to send a telegraph around the world; Michael Faraday’s experiments with electromagnetism realized the full potential of electricity, and from 1896 onwards, British towns and cities enjoyed electric streetlights. In addition, standards of health care improved as well. For example, stethoscopes were in common use by 1850s, as well as improved microscopes, which were beginning to make a valuable contribution to medical research; Joseph Lister developed an antiseptic in the 1860s; and Florence Nightingale’s school of nursing, established in 1860, professionalized the treatment, Dargie notices.⁶¹ In brief, it is plainly evident that the Victorian period was one of great learning and mind, and it foreshadowed the approach of the Modern Age.

Finally, the British Empire will be discussed. Peers argues that “the empire was one of the defining characteristics of nineteenth-century Britain” because by the end of Victoria’s reign it comprised almost a quarter of the total population of the world and extended over

⁵⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 112-113.

⁵⁹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 63.

⁶⁰ Guy, *Victoria*, 12.

⁶¹ Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 162-163.

about one-fifth of the earth's surface.⁶² According to McDowall, the British Empire's strength lay in industry, trade and the navy which protected this trade, and thus Britain guarded its interests by keeping ships of its navy in almost every ocean of the world.⁶³ As Guy sees it, "the industrialization of Britain and the strength of the Empire were of mutual benefit." To be more precise, the new industries sold their commodities to the colonies, and in turn, the colonies supplied Britain with plenitude of raw materials to make yet more goods.⁶⁴ McDowall further explains that most of the colonies established in the Victorian era were, however, more to do with political control than with trading for profit, which stemmed from Britain's anxiety about growing competition from rival European countries, notably France, possessor of the world's second-largest colonial empire, and Germany.⁶⁵ Naturally, the Empire was neither gained nor maintained peacefully, emphasizes Burns, and so Britain was constantly engaged in wars, such as the Crimean War or the South African Wars,⁶⁶ and frontier actions that expanded the Empire and defended its borders, as Mitchell notices.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, with considerable poverty and unemployment in Britain, "there was no shortage of volunteers to sign up for the many military campaigns of Victoria's empire-building reign." Indeed, people thought that it was better to risk their lives and die with honour than to die destitute, Guy clarifies it.⁶⁸

Furthermore, McDowall states that another reason for creating colonies was growing concern at the rapidly increasing population of Britain. In fact, a lot of people, particularly from the upper class, demanded the development of colonies for British settlers as a clear solution to the problem.⁶⁹ One of them is also *An Ideal Husband's* Lady Markby:

The fact is, we all scramble and jostle so much nowadays [...] I know myself that when I am coming back from the Drawing Room, I always feel as if I hadn't shred on me, except a small shred of decent reputation, just enough to prevent the lower classes making painful observations through the windows of the carriage. The fact is that our Society is terribly over-populated. Really, someone should arrange a proper scheme of assisted emigration. It would do a great deal of good.⁷⁰

⁶² Douglas M. Peers, "Britain and Empire," in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Chris Williams (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 53.

⁶³ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 131.

⁶⁴ Guy, *Victoria*, 17.

⁶⁵ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 132.

⁶⁶ Burns, *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 155.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 276.

⁶⁸ Guy, *Victorian Life*, 24.

⁶⁹ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 148.

⁷⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 37.

As a result, argues McDowall, there was large increase in settlement in Canada, Australia and New Zealand,⁷¹ where emigrants were keen to try a new start, faced with poverty and unemployment in home Britain, Guy adds.⁷²

As for Australia, Mitchell points out that it served as an eventual destination for British convicts as well. In reality, criminal transportation was an alternative to hanging, and before it came to an end in 1857, about 140,000 convicts had been sent there. After their sentence expired they were allowed to return, but passage back was not arranged, and for that reason most of them chose to stand.⁷³ Nevertheless, it seems that convicts did not have to be murderers only to serve their term in Australia. As the following example suggests, in rigid Victorian Britain, debts were considered reprehensible act as well: “I think you had better wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating. [...] He has gone up to buy your outfit. [...] Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia,”⁷⁴ informs *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Cecily Algernon of her guardian’s decision to ship him there due to substantial debts Algernon owes the Savoy. Another problem is Algernon’s flirting with Cecily, Jack’s young unmarried ward, which was also seen as shameful act. In other words, it is obvious that severe punishment such as the transportation led to decrease in criminality and made society more disciplined, which was, after all, distinctive to Victorian Britain.

What is more, Guy contends that although the Empire was not principally military led, countries subjected to the British reign were held down by a strong military presence in order to put down attempts by colonized people to reclaim their own territory.⁷⁵ Significantly, military officers had to satisfy two main requirements—they were expected to be gentlemen and accustomed to leadership. These qualities were promoted exclusively through public school training, and thus “military careers were especially popular with younger sons of the aristocracy and landed gentry,” Mitchell explains.⁷⁶ Hughes notes that there came to be a great prestige attached to service in India,⁷⁷ where served also General Moncrieff: “That [his manner] was the result of the Indian climate, [...] and indigestion, and other things of that

⁷¹ McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 148.

⁷² Guy, *Victoria*, 22.

⁷³ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 100.

⁷⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 40.

⁷⁵ Guy, *Victoria*, 18.

⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 276.

⁷⁷ Hughes, *The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England*, 95.

kind,”⁷⁸ clarifies Lady Bracknell Jack the reasons why her brother-in-law and Jack’s father was not exactly pleasant. Mitchell claims that India, known also as “the Raj,” was Britain’s most important and most distinctive overseas possession,⁷⁹ where, however, the British focused on eliminating “unacceptable” aspects of local culture, as Dargie remarks. On the other hand, the railway network was constructed; the infrastructure was modernized; a postal and telegraph system was established; and a system of schools and colleges was planned. Dargie further points out that this period of remarkable modernization but at the same time the period of incessant orders of British government officials, culminated in the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which naturally deeply affected Anglo-Indian relations.⁸⁰ As a consequence, in 1858, The East India Company, which had been originally established to protect British interests in India, was abolished; in 1876, Victoria became Empress of India, and India came under the direct rule of the British Government, Guy observes.⁸¹ Finally, McDowall concludes that the Empire gave the British a feeling of their own importance which was hard to forget when the Great Britain lost its power in the twentieth century.⁸²

To summarize, the Victorian period was a time of spectacular advances in industry, technology, science and medicine that altered every aspect of people’s daily life. Britain’s overwhelming industrial and technological dominance was celebrated at The Great Exhibition of 1851, which was a great success. Besides, the Victorian age saw impressive progress also in the fields of politics, education, and social system. In spite of the impressive progress in almost all spheres of activity, including imperial expansion, this period brought some grave problems as well. Nevertheless, they were gradually eliminated via sweeping governmental reforms.

⁷⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 111.

⁷⁹ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 286.

⁸⁰ Dargie, *The History of Britain*, 168-169.

⁸¹ Guy, *Victoria*, 18.

⁸² McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Great Britain*, 131.

2 SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND FOCUSED ON THE SOCIAL CLASS SYSTEM

Besides the historical background, which highlighted some of the most important events of the Victorian era that strongly influenced people's everyday lives, including characters in the selected works, equally important is the socio-cultural background. This chapter presents the significant feature of the Victorian society, which is appertaining to a certain social class. At first, a brief introduction to the Victorian class system is mentioned. Subsequently, a description of individual classes and their levels is provided. Finally, since plots of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* take place solely in the highest reaches of society, information about the upper-class life is also included. Moreover, theoretical information provided in this chapter is directly contrasted with the specific examples from the selected plays.

To start with, Mitchell explains that “the basic quality of daily life for people in Victorian England rested on an underlying structure determined by social class and shaped by traditional ways of life in country, town, and city.” In fact, English society in the Victorian period, continues Mitchell, was highly stratified, though some of the old class distinctions were beginning to blur by the end of the period.⁸³ According to Schomp, a person's class was determined partly by birth and partly by occupation,⁸⁴ as well as by the source of income and family connections, as Mitchell adds. Mitchell further claims that class was reflected in manners, speech, clothing, education, and values. In addition to that, the classes occupied separate areas and followed different social customs in everything from religion to courtship to the names and hours of their meals.⁸⁵ It is thus apparent that people's social class profoundly influenced every aspect of their daily life. Furthermore, Mitchell argues that each class had its own standards, and people were expected to be in line with the rules for their class. It was even considered unacceptable to behave like someone from a class above or below a person's own class.⁸⁶ To illustrate this point, such case of undesirable behaviour is found in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Cecily Cardew, a granddaughter of a wealthy gentleman and Jack Worthing's ward, is with her governess, Miss Prism, in the garden of

⁸³ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 17.

⁸⁴ Schomp, *The City*, 27.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 17.

⁸⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 18.

Jack's country house, and the moment Miss Prism spots Cecily watering the flowers together with the servant, which, of course, is not a suitable activity for this young lady with a substantial dowry, she, as her moral teacher, immediately starts doing her job:

MISS PRISM. [*calling*] Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German lesson has been waiting for you for nearly twenty minutes.⁸⁷

In other words, doing domestic chores or other practical things was not expected from upper-class people, for they had servants to do them.

In contrast to Cecily, upper-class Lady Bracknell and her nephew, Algernon Moncrieff, find doing any middle- or working-class activities wholly unacceptable. A typical example is Lady Bracknell's comment on the treatise "Green Carnation," a book about the culture of exotics, which she labels as "morbid and middle-class affair"⁸⁸ and so not good enough for her to read. What is interesting about this title is that Wilde used it intentionally as a reaction to Robert Hichens's *The Green Carnation*, published in 1894, which, as Raby assumes, parodied Wilde's life style.⁸⁹ In fact, the only books that are worth Lady Bracknell's reading are the court guides and etiquette manuals. Secondly, when Mr. Gribsby arrives at Jack's estate with a writ of attachment for twenty days at Holloway Prison for Ernest Worthing, Algernon, pretending to be Ernest, refuses to be imprisoned there because it is not in the fashionable part of the city:

GRIBSBY. The surroundings, I admit, are middle class; but the gaol itself is fashionable and well-aired; and there are ample opportunities of taking exercise at certain stated hours of the day.

ALGERNON. Well, I really am not going to be imprisoned in the suburbs for having dined in the West End.⁹⁰

In brief, both Lady Bracknell and Algernon Moncrieff fully conform to the rules for their class and they are unwilling to lower the standards they, as members of the upper class, enjoy.

As Mitchell suggests in her book, in the most accurate legal sense, Britain had only two classes: aristocrats (who had inherited titles and land) and commoners (everyone else). Nonetheless, it was naturally understood that the society was comprised of three social

⁸⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 33.

⁸⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 113.

⁸⁹ Peter Raby, "Wilde: The Remarkable Rocket," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1600-2000*, ed. Mary Luckhursts and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 39.

⁹⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 54.

classes—the upper class (the elite), middle class, and working class.⁹¹ In addition, Schomp remarks that within each of the classes, there were several different levels. To the Victorians, continues Schomp, the differences among all these groups were obvious and very important, but they were not set in stone. Indeed, in consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which brought substantial structural changes to Britain’s traditional class system, some distinctions were beginning to blur, particularly those between the upper middle and upper class.⁹² Individual layers of Victorian social hierarchy will be specified in the following paragraphs.

At the top of the social ladder were the titled. According to Pool, there were two orders of titled people in Britain. Dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons were known as the peerage. Peers were invariably immensely wealthy and possessed of huge landed estates. Considerably below them on the social scale came the gentry, the locally based “county families” of squires, clergy, baronets, and knights with properties not as gigantic as those of the dukes but large enough to have tenants, Pool adds.⁹³ Mitchell explains that the income of the peerage and the gentry stemmed from the rental of their property, which was leased on very long-time leases. Moreover, in case of the lands being less profitable, they lived on the investment income produced by money they had inherited,⁹⁴ which implies that they never had to search for any work for money. As an illustration, when *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Lady Bracknell makes her inquiries, she learns that Jack Worthing, her daughter’s suitor, has a country house with a tract of land attached to it, but he does not depend on that for his real income much, because his income, “between seven and eight thousand a year,” comes chiefly from investments.⁹⁵ It is hence apparent that he has never worked for money in his life, neither intends he to start any work in the future, for he lives on profitable investments. What is more, as Pool notes, together with the bishops and the archbishops of the Church of England, the peers constituted the House of Lords.⁹⁶

Besides *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Jack Worthing, Lady Bracknell, and their relatives, there are many other representatives of the upper class in the selected works. For example, *An Ideal Husband*’s Chilterns, *The Earl of Caversham*, *Viscount Goring*, *Vicomte de Nanjac*, *The Countess of Basildon*, to name a few. This class, no doubt, is the most

⁹¹ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 18.

⁹² Schomp, *The City*, 27-28.

⁹³ Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 35, 46.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 21, 35.

⁹⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 21.

⁹⁶ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 35.

numerous there, and therefore further information about the upper-class life will be provided in the second half of the social background.

The lower level of the class hierarchy, points out Schomp, was occupied by the middle class, those who worked with their “brains,” not their hands.⁹⁷ Mitchell emphasizes that during the Victorian era, the middle class grew in size as well as importance.⁹⁸ To be more precise, in the early nineteenth century, the middle class was comprised of a relatively small number of well-to-do professionals, whereas by the end of the century, it included a large group of people in miscellaneous occupations, who altogether made up about twenty-five percent of the population, Schomp asserts. Members of this growing class, continues Schomp, were generally divided into two main groups, upper and lower. The upper middle class included men in older professions such as law, medicine, and banking, who profited from the increases in population and business, as well as top military and naval officers, university professors, Church of England clergymen, and the headmasters of prestigious schools. Furthermore, new technologies offered respected careers in fields such as civil engineering and architecture.⁹⁹ Mitchell remarks that the newer members of the upper middle class became also large-scale merchants and manufacturers—men whose success was a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution. More important, however, is the fact that the most affluent among them achieved some class mobility in the next generation by sending their sons to prestigious boarding schools and marrying off their daughters to landowners, Mitchell adds.¹⁰⁰ Schomp observes that the lower middle class encompassed an even wider range of occupations. There were, for instance, midlevel business managers and civil servants, shopkeepers and shop assistants, foot soldiers, policemen, governesses, schoolteachers, and most clerical workers.¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that the middle class grew in size and importance, it is not portrayed much in the selected plays. It is represented by *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Miss Prism, Cecily’s governess, Rev. Canon Cheasuble, the rector on Jack’s estate, and the solicitor, Mr. Gribsby; and by *An Ideal Husband*’s Mr. Montford and Mr. Trafford, Sir Robert Chiltern’s secretaries, who, however, “physically” appear only once and then they are only mentioned, the aforementioned solicitor alike.

⁹⁷ Schomp, *The City*, 27.

⁹⁸ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 19.

⁹⁹ Schomp, *The City*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Schomp, *The City*, 30.

After describing the stratification of the upper and middle class, the last place in the class hierarchy was occupied by the working class, people who made their living by manual labour, particularizes Schomp. Like the upper and middle class, continues Schomp, the working class was divided into layers, where the most fortunate were the artisans (skilled workers). This group included printers, carpenters, masons, shoemakers, and other highly trained people in traditional trades, as well as specialists in new fields such as machine and engine repair. Significantly, skilled workers earned more and obtained steadier employment than other people from their class. Nevertheless, the majority of working-class people were semiskilled workers employed in mining, fishing, construction, weaving, dressmaking, and other manual trades. What is more, many were domestic servants in the homes of upper- and middle-class families, and hundreds of thousands of them laboured in workshops, mills, and factories.¹⁰² And what Mitchell highlights is that most factory hands earned just enough to stay alive, and could fall into the poverty trap very easily.¹⁰³ Finally, Schomp contends that “the lowest level of the lower working class was made up of people with no particular trade or training.” These unskilled workers eked out a living by doing whatever work was available—a day labourer, unloading ships at the docks or digging ditches, a dustman, a crossing sweeper, a street vendor, etc.¹⁰⁴

Like the middle-class representatives, members of the working class are not much present in the selected works. Apart from several footmen, there appear only Algernon Moncrieff’s servant Lane, Jack Worthing’s servant Moulton and butler Merriman in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; and Sir Robert Chiltern’s butler Mason and Lord Goring’s butler Phipps in *An Ideal Husband*.

As mentioned before, the vast majority of characters in the selected works by Oscar Wilde are titled nobility, landed gentry, or they hold a defined social status as a politician, a diplomat, etc. Moreover, plots of both plays take place solely in luxurious drawing-rooms and other posh rooms in spacious London houses or country estates, where the best society lives. Therefore, more detailed information about their typical way of life is provided. As constructed by Mitchell, “Society, in the restrictive sense of the word, was composed of fewer than 1,500 families drawn from the aristocracy and substantial gentry.” During the social season, these families moved from their country estates to the houses in a fashionable part of London and amused themselves with shopping, paying calls, attending art exhibitions, going

¹⁰² Schomp, *The City*, 27, 31-32.

¹⁰³ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Schomp, *The City*, 33.

to the opera or the theatre, to balls, concerts, house parties, and sporting events.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Pool explains that in London, the nobility resided within a relatively small area of the West End, where the most desirable residences were right next to Hyde Park on Park Lane, the western border of Mayfair. Then, just east of the park, came Grosvenor Square, where, incidentally, live *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Bracknells as well as the Chilterns in *An Ideal Husband*, and Berkeley Square in Mayfair itself. Farther south was the slightly less desirable but still fashionable area of Belgrave Square. Predictably, the rest of the city became less fashionable and to the east, in particular, degenerated into slums, and the East End along the docks beyond the area of the Tower became synonymous with poverty and misery, as Pool further adds.¹⁰⁶ In other words, the upper-class Victorians were not only expected to behave in a standard manner which was required from their class, but also to occupy a distinctive house and address corresponding with their social status. Naturally, Lady Bracknell, who herself lives in Grosvenor Square, wants her only daughter, Gwendolen, to marry a gentleman who owns a house in the same or even more exclusive part of the city. However, Jack's house is located "only" in Belgrave Square, which puts him to inconvenience, because snobbish Lady Bracknell considers this locality "the unfashionable side."¹⁰⁷

In fact, Pool suggests that the most eager families began moving to the West End sometime around Christmas. Nevertheless, the height of the season, a dizzying three-month whirlwind of parties, balls, receptions and other social events, did not come until the opening of Parliament in May and thus peers coming to the City for meetings of the House of Lords.¹⁰⁸ Mitchell supports Pool's point by stating that "by tradition, the season's first important social event was the opening of the May exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts."¹⁰⁹ The first of the gala court balls and concerts, and the beginning of the round of debutante-delighting private balls and dances followed afterward, as Pool mentions. In May or June, continues Pool, came the two major annual sporting events of the season—the Derby and then Ascot. In addition to that, July witnessed the Henley Regatta along with various great cricket contests, notably between Oxford and Cambridge, and between Eton and Harrow.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 157.

¹⁰⁶ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 51-52.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 157.

¹¹⁰ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 52-53.

However, it should be noted that society life had its serious side as well, Mitchell points out. Since many of society's gentlemen were highly positioned in the government or other central institutions, the social events created an opportunity for cementing alliances, conducting political business, and promoting keen interests of the elite. Consequently, large formal dinners were held especially on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when Parliament had no evening sessions.¹¹¹ That is the case in *An Ideal Husband*: "We are always at home on Wednesdays,"¹¹² invites Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's younger sister, their family friend Lord Caversham to come to their dinner parties more often. Not even *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Lady Bracknell is idle in the evenings when Parliament does not hold a meeting. Therefore, she wants her nephew, Algernon, to arrange music for her Saturday reception, and since it is her last reception of the season, she needs "something that will encourage conversation—particularly at the end of the season, when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say."¹¹³ Obviously, dinner parties were important social events and hence key to attend in order to keep one in the middle of things.

What is more, the other crucial function of the social season, observes Mitchell, was its role in arranging marriages.¹¹⁴ This fact is supported in *An Ideal Husband* by Mrs. Cheveley, who claims that: "It [the London season] is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them."¹¹⁵ In reality, among the aristocracy, continues Mitchell, the social season or two after a girl's presentation to the Queen at St. James's Palace or Buckingham Palace, and so to fashionable society, was known as the time of her being on the "marriage market."¹¹⁶ Moreover, Hughes explains that once she had been presented, a young lady then embarked on a whirl of balls and parties and set her mind upon finding a suitable husband from among those eligible bachelors in her own class.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, as Mitchell argues, marriages were no longer literally arranged by parents to cement territorial or political alliances, as they had been in earlier times, but mothers, aunts, and grandmothers put careful thought into relating young people who had compatible interests and, above all, comparable social standing.¹¹⁸ Naturally, this could be done only with difficulty in the country, assumes Pool, but at the round of social events which the London season offered, there were such huge

¹¹¹ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 157.

¹¹² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 2.

¹¹³ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 15.

¹¹⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 157.

¹¹⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 7.

¹¹⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 157-158.

¹¹⁷ Hughes, *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England*, 179.

¹¹⁸ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 158-159.

numbers of affluent and titled young men and women present that it was unthinkable that a young woman would not attract someone's attention. Therefore, if the girl did not get married within two or three seasons she was considered a failure, Pool adds.¹¹⁹ To sum up, the presentation at court and the first London season marked a dramatic turning point in the life of every upper-class girl. It defined new social roles the girl had to adopt and duties she had to fulfil. Furthermore, in *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Markby remarks: "There is nothing so difficult to marry as a large nose; men don't like them,"¹²⁰ which implies that attractive physical appearance gave the girl a considerable advantage.

As mentioned above, parents, particularly mothers together with other female relatives, devoted a lot of their time to choosing the best husbands for their daughters. For that reason, *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Lady Bracknell takes the trouble to compile a list of eligible young men for her daughter. Unfortunately for Gwendolen, Jack, the man with whom she is in love, is not even at the bottom of this list. Thus, when Gwendolen tells her mother that she is already engaged to him, she receives a sharp reply:

Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. 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.¹²¹

On the other hand, Jack himself rejects his friend Algernon's offer to marry Cecily, his ward, because he, as Cecily's guardian, does not consider Algernon a suitable man for her.¹²² Moreover, *An Ideal Husband's* Lord Caversham urges his son, Lord Goring, to get married as soon as possible, for he is yet thirty-four and still a bachelor. However, like Lady Bracknell, he does not want Lord Goring to choose the lady himself:

LORD GORING. My dear father, if I am to get married, surely you will allow me to choose the time, place, and person? Particularly the person.

LORD CAVERSHAM. That is matter for me, sir. You would probably make a very poor choice. It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life.¹²³

In short, when it came to proposal and marriage, parents paid no regard to what their children said to them. The most distinctive aspects were husband's-to-be/wife's-to-be reputation, social standing, and value of property.

¹¹⁹ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 52-53.

¹²⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 18.

¹²¹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 19.

¹²² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 97-98.

¹²³ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 51.

Mitchell clarifies that the social season ended when Parliament recessed, by custom for the opening of the grouse season on 12th August. During the winter, noble families might travel in Europe or to hot countries, but the autumn was devoted to country sports.¹²⁴ As Pool remarks, partridge shooting began on 1st September, the pheasant season opened 1st October, and on the first Monday of November there came the popular opening of fox-hunting season.¹²⁵ Frequently, notes Mitchell, the more active members of society engaged in a round of mutual visits to estates round the country, often lasting for several days. In fact, among the leisured class, houseguests and long visits from relatives, notably from single or widowed aunts and sisters, were common.¹²⁶ That is why *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Gwendolen, who arrives at Jack's, her fiancé's, country estate for the first time, naturally supposes that Cecily, Jack's ward, is only a visitor there, and she immediately asks after her "mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years."¹²⁷ And when she learns that young, pretty Cecily lives there, Gwendolen is very surprised and gets rather jealous of her:

Well, to speak candidly, Cecily, I wish that you were fully thirty-five and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others.¹²⁸

Lastly, after finishing the all-year-long social whirl, it was already time around Christmas, which meant that families in society gradually began leaving their country estates to start the whole thing all over again, as Pool asserts.¹²⁹

In conclusion, this chapter proved the fact that social class played a key role in the Victorian world. The Victorian society was arranged into three main classes—upper, middle, and working—with several levels each, which determined people's quality of life as well as their rights and duties. In *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there are clear boundaries between the upper class and the rest of the society. The peerage and landed gentry, such as Lady Bracknell and Algernon Moncrieff, deem doing any lower-class activities and practical things utterly unacceptable. Obviously, they are selfish and care only about themselves and their comfortable life.

¹²⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 158.

¹²⁵ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 54.

¹²⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 149, 158.

¹²⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 75.

¹²⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 75.

¹²⁹ Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, 54.

3 LITERARY CONTEXT OF AN *IDEAL HUSBAND* AND *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

Now, the chapter providing information about the literary context of the selected works follows. At first, a brief introduction to British theatre in the 1890s is provided. Secondly, a broad comparison between O. Wilde and G. B. Shaw, and a critique of Wilde's works is presented. Then, the Aesthetic Movement is discussed. Finally, the last part focuses on the classification of the selected plays.

As mentioned in the historical background, Victoria's long reign saw a considerable growth in literature. According to Alexander, during the last two decades of the period, there appeared various specialist forms in literature, such as Aestheticism, Decadence, and professional entertainment. Those decades also saw an overdue revival of drama, with Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw as the leading figures, Alexander adds.¹³⁰ In fact, "in Oscar Wilde's day, London theatre was enjoying expansion and renewed respectability," with the patronage of fashionable people, including royalty, and members of affluent society—exactly the type of characters who occupy his plays, as Victoria and Albert Museum suggests.¹³¹ Moreover, Raby agrees that "the London theatre formed a kind of annex to the London drawing-room, and Wilde's plays deliberately mirrored the luxury, power and morality of upper-class English society," the sphere Wilde himself knew perfectly.¹³²

Concerning Wilde and Shaw, despite relishing the Celtic heritage they shared with each other, notes Raby, it is important to point out that they fashioned a distinctively contrasting public personalities.¹³³ Jackson enriches Raby's point by stating that Shaw chose working within a radical theatre, whereas Wilde decided to participate in an established, fashionable one. In addition, "Wilde's characters both embody and mock dramatic stereotypes," continues Jackson, and his "tactics are also quite different from those of Shaw." Generally, "his [Wilde's] characters are ruthless in the pursuit of selfish goals and absurd ideals," whereas Shaw's heroes are combative in the furtherance of social justice,¹³⁴ and, as Alexander

¹³⁰ Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 247, 293.

¹³¹ "London Theatre at the Time of *The Importance of Being Earnest*," Victoria and Albert Museum online, accessed November 9, 2014, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/l/london-theatre-at-the-time-of-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

¹³² Raby, "Wilde: *The Remarkable Rocket*," 32.

¹³³ Raby, "Wilde: *The Remarkable Rocket*," 31.

¹³⁴ Russell Jackson, "The Importance of Being Earnest," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 172-173, 175.

remarks, serve as a tool of political enlightenment and social reform.¹³⁵ Nonetheless, as Branch suitably summarizes, both Wilde and Shaw “had taken conventional dramatic form and infused it with a new vitality,” and thus enriched modern English drama.¹³⁶

In spite of the fact that Oscar Wilde has probably been written about more than most nineteenth-century writers, explains Branch, his place and reputation continue to be uncertain. To be more specific, Wilde’s eccentric personality and extraordinary wit have so dominated the imaginations of most biographers and critics that their estimates of his work have too often consisted of sympathetic tributes to, or attacks on, him. Besides, “late nineteenth-century critics habitually judged Wilde’s work by its “sincerity,” which, for the Victorians, implied moral earnestness and fidelity to “inner” feeling.” Another critical objection, continues Branch, focused on his lack of originality and “imitation” of other authors.¹³⁷ For example, Clement Scott drew readers’ attention to similarity between Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* and Victorien Sardou’s *Dora*, which, according to him, is “too marked not to be noticed.”¹³⁸ What is more, Fraser expresses a similar opinion on this matter by arguing that “stealing from one play, Wilde enriched the next.”¹³⁹ As Jackson assumes, this critique most likely stemmed from Wilde’s borrowing from stock characters of the popular theatre, such as the woman with a past (*An Ideal Husband*’s Mrs. Cheveley, a comic variation of this figure represents also *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Miss Prism), the innocently idealistic young woman, forced to confront the sordid realities of political and social life (*An Ideal Husband*’s Lady Chiltern), and the dandy (*The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Algernon Moncrieff, *An Ideal Husband*’s Lord Goring).¹⁴⁰

As Alexander observes in his book, Oscar Wilde was a poet, journalist, theorist and a provocative critic, but his distinction lay in his society plays—*Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*—staged in 1892–1895.¹⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, analysis of which is the topic of this bachelor thesis, have been the most popular among the audience. Both plays were written in 1890s and their plots take place in the same period, the

¹³⁵ Alexander, *A History of English Literature*, 300.

¹³⁶ Watson G. Branch, introduction to *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, by Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 14.

¹³⁷ Branch, introduction, 1-2.

¹³⁸ Clement Scott, “Clement Scott on *An Ideal Husband*, 1895,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 201.

¹³⁹ Russell A. Fraser, *Moderns Worth Keeping* (USA: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 6.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” 166.

¹⁴¹ Alexander, *A History of English Literature*, 298.

period of Britain's industrial power, technological advances, scientific breakthroughs, imperial expansion and sweeping reforms, but also of rigid system of social mores and conventions. According to Branch, *An Ideal Husband*, which opened on 3rd January, 1895 at the Theatre Royal, did not draw praise, for instance, from H. G. Wells,¹⁴² declaring it "fairly bad"¹⁴³ and "decidedly disappointing after *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Woman of No Importance*."¹⁴⁴ In contrast, William Dean Howells found it "not only an excellent piece of art, but all excellent piece of sense,"¹⁴⁵ and G. B. Shaw enjoyed it as well.¹⁴⁶ As for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Branch points out that with its production on 14th February, 1895, Wilde achieved his greatest theatrical triumph.¹⁴⁷ Alexander supports this claim by stating that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been rated the best English comedy since William Congreve and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and more quoted than any play not by William Shakespeare.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, "the audience at the St. James's Theatre on opening night was reduced to spasms of laughter," and most critics were equally amazed, Branch adds.¹⁴⁹ For example, H. G. Wells, who had been disappointed with *An Ideal Husband*, considered Wilde's latest play "thoroughly delightful"¹⁵⁰ and "with a flavour of rare holiday."¹⁵¹ In addition, the critic who signed "H.F." wrote that he/she had not heard "such unrestrained, incessant laughter from all parts of the theatre, since *Charley's Aunt* was first brought from the provinces to London."¹⁵² Still, some critics disagreed with this widespread praise. For instance, Shaw, who had delighted in *An Ideal Husband*, found *The Importance of Being Earnest* amusing, but "essentially hateful."¹⁵³ Besides, he argued that it was "a heartless

¹⁴² Branch, introduction, 13.

¹⁴³ H.G. Wells, "H.G. Wells on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 213.

¹⁴⁴ H.G. Wells, "H.G. Wells on *An Ideal Husband*, 1895" in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 195.

¹⁴⁵ William D. Howells, "William Dean Howells on *An Ideal Husband*, 1895," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 209.

¹⁴⁶ George B. Shaw, "George Bernard Shaw on *An Ideal Husband*, 1895," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 199.

¹⁴⁷ Branch, introduction, 14.

¹⁴⁸ Alexander, *A History of English Literature*, 298.

¹⁴⁹ Branch, introduction, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Branch, introduction, 14.

¹⁵¹ Wells, "H.G. Wells on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895," 213.

¹⁵² "H.F.," "Reception of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 215.

¹⁵³ George B. Shaw, "George Bernard Shaw on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 221.

play” with “the general effect [...] of a farcial comedy dating from the seventies.”¹⁵⁴ In short, it is plainly evident that individual points of view widely differed.

What is remarkable about Wilde, explains Raby, is the “transformation of an author into a personality, and the distillation of that personality into a manner, and a button-hole,”¹⁵⁵ which “must be worn as a protest against nature’s limitations and self-plagiarism, and also against English earnestness and dullness,” as Kiberd suggests.¹⁵⁶ All these aesthetic principles are connected with the Aesthetic Movement. According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the Aesthetic Movement, or Aestheticism, “was a European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century that had its chief headquarters in France.”¹⁵⁷ As written in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, in England, it culminated in the 1890s, with Oscar Wilde as its most visible icon and Walter Pater its recognized philosopher. It should be noted that Aestheticism was not only a literary and artistic movement, but a sensibility, and a philosophy of life and of art as well.¹⁵⁸ In fact, it was developed in opposition to “the dominance of scientific thinking, and in defiance of the widespread indifference or hostility of the middle-class society of their time to any art that did not teach moral values,” *A Glossary of Literary Terms* states.¹⁵⁹ According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, it “believed that art and literature had value in themselves rather than needing any moral purpose,”¹⁶⁰ which was, after all, asserted by Wilde himself: “Art, as art, has nothing to do with morality or immorality. It is the function of art to present the beauty of things, just as it is the function of science to present the truth of things.”¹⁶¹ Significantly, a rallying cry of Aestheticism became Walter Pater’s “the love of art for its own sake,” a version of the French *l’art pour l’art*, “implying the repudiation of the “heresy of instruction,” the roughness of the stereotyped world of actuality and the orthodoxy of philosophical systems and fixed points of view,” as *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* explains.¹⁶² What is more, Adams observes that Oscar Wilde “transformed it [Aestheticism] into the register of spectacle.”¹⁶³ It played part in his dress, his

¹⁵⁴ Shaw, “George Bernard Shaw on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895,” 221.

¹⁵⁵ Raby, “Wilde: The Remarkable Rocket,” 42.

¹⁵⁶ Declan Kiberd, “Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 285-286.

¹⁵⁷ M.H. Abrams et al., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 3.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

¹⁵⁹ Abrams et al., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ A.S. Hornby et al., *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24.

¹⁶¹ Ernest Newman, “Ernest Newman on Wilde’s Genius for Paradox, 1895,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 2005), 234.

¹⁶² Childs and Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2.

¹⁶³ James E. Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 326.

interiors and in the appearance of his published books, Calloway remarks.¹⁶⁴ Inevitably, with Wilde's downfall, the Aesthetic Movement lost its popularity, informs Victoria and Albert Museum website of the fact.¹⁶⁵ It should be also mentioned that Aestheticism was connected with "Dandyism." The figure of a Dandy, will be, however, fully discussed in the analytical part of the thesis.

Finally, it is necessary to introduce the classification of the selected works. In the broader sense, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* represent the category of modern English drama and belong to the genre of comedy. According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the term "comedy" is customarily applied only to plays for the stage, written chiefly in order to interest and amuse its audience by discomfitures of the characters, and usually with a happy ending.¹⁶⁶ Drama scholars and critics further classify the plays partly as a comedy of manners, Victorian melodrama, farce, and satire. Firstly, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a comedy of manners as "a kind of comedy representing the complex and sophisticated code of behaviour current in fashionable circles of society, where appearances count for more than true moral character." In addition, a scandal is part of the plot, and its humour relies primarily upon elegant verbal wit and repartee.¹⁶⁷ Secondly, as Encyclopaedia Britannica explains, a melodrama has "an improbable plot that concerns the vicissitudes suffered by the virtuous at the hands of the villainous but ends happily with virtue triumphant." Besides, featuring stock characters, such as the noble hero, long-suffering heroine and cold-blooded villain, the melodrama focuses on sensational incidents, coincidences, recognition scenes, and spectacular staging.¹⁶⁸ Thirdly, according to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a farce "employs highly exaggerated or caricatured character-types and puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations." It makes free use of sexual mix-ups, physical bustle, horseplay, and broad verbal humour including puns.¹⁶⁹ Finally, as written in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, satire ridicules political policies and philosophical doctrines, as well as human vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings.¹⁷⁰ It uses means of wit, irony, parody,

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Calloway, "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39-40.

¹⁶⁵ "Style Guide: Aestheticism," Victoria and Albert Museum online, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/a/aestheticism/> <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-aestheticism/>

¹⁶⁶ Abrams et al., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 38.

¹⁶⁷ Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁶⁸ "Melodrama," Encyclopaedia Britannica online, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/art/melodrama>

¹⁶⁹ Abrams et al., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 39-40.

¹⁷⁰ Abrams et al., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 39, 275-276.

caricature and sarcasm, “sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform,” Encyclopaedia Britannica states.¹⁷¹

To summarize, this chapter provided literary background to *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* and set them in the context of late Victorian period when drama enjoyed a revival of popularity and the plays were written and produced. It focused also on the main reasons why Oscar Wilde’s works were often criticized, and presented both critical and favourable comments by several critics and reviewers, for example G. B. Shaw. Since Wilde was a well-known exponent of Aestheticism, this movement, which is reflected also in his characters’ way of life, was discussed as well. Finally, the genre categories into which the selected plays fit, with a brief description of each category, was introduced.

¹⁷¹ “Satire,” Encyclopaedia Britannica online, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/art/satire>

4. ANALYSIS OF VICTORIAN CONVENTIONS AND UPPER-CLASS MORALITY IN *AN IDEAL HUSBAND* AND *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

This chapter is focused on the analysis of the Victorian society. It is a well-known fact that Oscar Wilde himself loved luxury and success, and that he enjoyed the pleasures of the upper class. However, he also saw through its members and became a critic of their negative qualities, particularly hypocrisy. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily Cardew defines hypocrisy as “pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time,”¹⁷² which, of course, is the opposite. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, hypocrisy is “behaviour in which somebody pretends to have moral standards or opinions that they do not actually have.”¹⁷³ Therefore, the principal aim of this part is to analyse morality of the Victorian upper class found in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Another focus is on the Victorian conventions and social intolerance against which Wilde protested via his dandy characters.

To start with, when one thinks of the Victorian age, the phrase “Victorian morality” comes rapidly to mind. In fact, it carries a wide range of connotations, notably prudery, hypocrisy, sexual repression, and rigid social control, as Mitchell particularizes.¹⁷⁴ Hughes agrees that this period was characterized by its strictures, rules, codes of behaviour, and a strong social ethic, which affected nearly every area of people’s daily existence.¹⁷⁵ According to Mitchell, morality in the Victorian era was associated with a set of values which differed according to the social class to which a person appertained. For example, the skilled workers, or artisans, and lower middle-class men strongly believed that they could change their lives. That is why they valued self-help, self-denial, hard work, and uncomplaining independence. Other values distinctive to the middle class were self-control, faith, sense of duty, honour, thrift, and earnestness. Importantly, stricter moral standards in the middle class influenced both the respectable working class and the upper class. Concerning the upper class, Mitchell further contends that the moral virtue of work, for instance, extended beyond the world of paid employment. As a result, the leisured life became less common among the aristocracy

¹⁷² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 39.

¹⁷³ Hornby et al., *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 766.

¹⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 261.

¹⁷⁵ Hughes, *The Writer’s Guide to Everyday Life in Regency and Victorian England*, 174.

and gentry, because women at home felt guilty if they were idle, spending the whole day arranging flowers, embroidering, or chatting with their guests. The feeling thus did a great deal to promote charity, philanthropy, and social welfare work by people whose income came from other sources.¹⁷⁶ One of them is also *An Ideal Husband*'s Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's younger sister, who is practising for a charity performance:

LADY MARKBY. Going already?

MABEL CHILTERN. I am so sorry but I am obliged to. I am just off to rehearsal. I have got to stand on my head in some tableaux.

LADY MARKBY. On your head, child? Oh! I hope not. I believe it is most unhealthy.

MABEL CHILTERN. But it is for an excellent charity [...] I am the secretary, and Tommy Trafford is treasurer. [...] Oh! Lord Goring is president.

LADY MARKBY. [*reflecting*] You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A little too modern, perhaps.¹⁷⁷

In contrast, calling Mabel "too modern," older Lady Markby shows that she is not very keen on promoting a charity, which means that she does not belong to the above mentioned group of upper-class people who felt guilty because of their leisured life. Obviously, younger people, such as Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring, were much more open to new attitudes and trends than older, conservative generations of London Society represented for example by Lady Markby.

Mitchell points out that another Victorian watchword was respectability. In fact, from the working class to the aristocracy, respectability was the topmost thing on people's minds, for besides the class it was used as a primary social distinction.¹⁷⁸ It should be mentioned that the lower classes earned respectability through hard work and other aforementioned virtues, observes Nelson, whereas among the upper classes a respectable man's primary task was to be a gentleman.¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, a man from the landed class was considered a gentleman in general, as Mitchell assumes. Nevertheless, gentlemanliness did not depend wholly on birth but also required certain values, standards, and modes of behaviour.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, Nelson emphasizes that it was also a way of life.¹⁸¹ As Mitchell further explains, a gentleman had been schooled in loyalty, team spirit, fair-play, courage, leadership, and stoic self-control. Besides, he was courteous, considerate, and socially at ease. Furthermore, he behaved honourably toward all women; he paid his debts and kept his word; he would do the right

¹⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 261-265, 268.

¹⁷⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 36-37.

¹⁷⁸ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 264.

¹⁷⁹ Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England*, 28.

¹⁸⁰ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 270.

¹⁸¹ Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England*, 28.

thing without thinking about what it might cost him financially; and he did not call attention to his own cleverness, or show too much enthusiasm.¹⁸² In short, a gentleman was honourable, dependable, ethical, and he lived up to his own standards.

An Ideal Husband's Sir Robert Chiltern, with a manner of impeccable distinction and good breeding, seems to be a prototypical gentleman. He is wealthy and so does not have to care about money, and he has no debts. He is an Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs and a respected Member of Parliament, who, nonetheless, aspires to even more prestigious position. Sir Robert is educated, ambitious, polite, tactful, and perfectly courteous to all women and men. In addition, he has an attractive wife "of Greek beauty"¹⁸³ and an ideal marriage. What is more, he is considered to be an ideal husband and a model politician. Therefore, he is "intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many,"¹⁸⁴ especially his supportive wife, who is completely devoted to him. In brief, he is a portrait of success.

However, this picture of a highly respectable gentleman begins to blur with the arrival of opportunistic, cunning Mrs. Cheveley, who returns from Vienna as a kind of ghost from Sir Robert's past. In her pocket, there is a letter which proves that his wealth and successful career have been based on a dishonest act of selling private state information to Baron Arnheim, a sly Austrian financier, eighteen years ago. And she, knowing of his guilty past, attempts to blackmail him. Being afraid of public exposure, which would completely wreck his life, Sir Robert decides to confide his dark secret to Lord Goring, his best friend, and asks him for advice. Nevertheless, when Goring asks him whether he ever regretted for what he had done, Sir Robert replies:

No. I felt that I had fought the century with its own weapons and won. [...] I don't say that I suffered any remorse. I didn't. Not remorse in the ordinary, rather silly sense of the word. But I have paid conscience money many times. I had a wild hope that I might disarm destiny. The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in public charities since then.¹⁸⁵

Thus, Chiltern is a hypocrite because he has pretended to be the honourable gentleman who, besides other things, financially supports charities of his good will, while the real motive for donations was not to feel bad. Furthermore, he has been lying to everyone around him, including his loving wife and his loyal best friend. On the top of that, he has never considered anything of his behaviour shameful. On the other hand, he apparently had had a great capacity

¹⁸² Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 271-272.

¹⁸³ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 1.

¹⁸⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 4.

¹⁸⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 28.

to succeed in politics, but, as he himself utters, he was not propertied enough: “I was twenty-two at the time, and I had the double misfortune of being well-born and poor, two unforgivable things nowadays.”¹⁸⁶ “That money gave me exactly what I wanted, power over others. I went into the House immediately.”¹⁸⁷ In short, it implies that he was a victim of the rigid Victorian age, which did not allow people without large property to sit in Parliament until latter years of the period.

Another man who is considered a respectable gentleman by people around him is *The Importance of Being Earnest*’s Jack Worthing. Jack, alias John or Ernest Worthing, is a twenty-nine-year-old bachelor who lives on his country estate in Hertfordshire. He is regarded a respectable gentleman, for he has many responsibilities which he dutifully fulfil. To be more specific, he is a guardian to eighteen-year-old Cecily Cardew and so is responsible for her upbringing and education. Besides, as a landowner he must look after his tenants and other employees, including the local rector and Cecily’s governess, who are dependent on him. What is more, Jack has a younger brother named Ernest, who is the complete opposite to Jack. Ernest is extremely irresponsible, and thus Jack must constantly travel to Albany/London, where Ernest stays, in order to get him out of some trouble. Therefore, Dr Chasuble, the rector, and Miss Prism, the governess, think the world of Jack:

CECILY. Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

MISS PRISM. Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility. [...] Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.¹⁸⁸

DR CHASUBLE. [...] Mr. Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet?

MISS PRISM. We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.

DR CHASUBLE. Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be.¹⁸⁹

It is plainly evident that Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble worship Jack’s virtuous character, whereas Cecily sees her guardian as a sedate, boring person who does not know what fun is. On the contrary, the opposite is true. She has not the faintest idea that her “Uncle Jack” has been leading a double life and his exemplary character is all an illusion. In reality, Jack

¹⁸⁶ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 25.

¹⁸⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 27.

¹⁸⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 34.

¹⁸⁹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 36-37.

himself is the “famous” amoral Ernest. He has devised a clever plan to be known as light-hearted, carefree, vivacious Ernest among his friends in London and as reserved, responsible, well-mannered Jack in the country. This plan is successful until Algernon Moncrieff, Jack’s best friend from London, who naturally knows him only as Ernest, finds Jack’s cigarette case with the mysterious inscription “From little Cecily with her fondest love to dear Uncle Jack”¹⁹⁰ and starts asking him searching questions. Jack tells him a pack of elaborate lies to satisfy his intense curiosity, but this makes Algernon even more interested in the matter. Eventually, Algernon’s persistent pressure on Jack makes him let his friend into his well-kept secret: “Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country. And the cigarette case was given to me in the country.”¹⁹¹ He also acknowledges that he is a guardian to young Cecily there. Nevertheless, Algernon is still not wholly satisfied with the amount of information he has just learned and therefore wants to know the reason why Jack uses two different names:

My dear Algy, I don’t know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of a guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone, on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so, and as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness if carried to excess, in order to get up to town I have always pretended I have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth, pure and simple.¹⁹²

In other words, Jack does not only use two different names, but he has created two different identities, and the fictional brother Ernest serves as Jack’s pretext for travelling to London and thus for escaping from the boring responsibilities he has as the respectable guardian and landowner in the country. In London, he amuses himself with all-night parties and other pleasures which the city offers, including ungentlemanly conduct such as not paying one’s bills:

JACK. Well, I can’t dine at the Savoy. I owe them about £700. They are always getting judgements and things against me. They bother my life out.

ALGERNON. Why on earth don’t you pay them? You have got heaps of money.

JACK. Yes, but Ernest hasn’t, and I must keep up Ernest’s reputation. Ernest is one of those chaps who never pay a bill. He gets writted about once a week.¹⁹³

Obviously, while in London, he does not take morality into consideration and behaves in the way he would not dare to as Jack. “When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in

¹⁹⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 6.

¹⁹¹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 8.

¹⁹² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 9.

¹⁹³ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 10.

the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring,”¹⁹⁴ concludes Jack his explanation. Thus, Jack is a clear symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

Surprisingly, Algernon, who seems shocked by Jack’s elaborate deception, confesses that he has made up a fictional figure as well:

You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. [...] Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn’t for Bunbury’s extraordinary bad health for instance, I wouldn’t be able to dine with you at the Savoy to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.¹⁹⁵

The chronic invalid thus serves as Algernon’s alibi whenever the young bachelor wishes to escape his social obligations. To be more precise, while his aunt, Lady Bracknell, indulges in holding large formal receptions, Algernon finds them boring and tiresome, and Bunbury’s repeated collapses serve as a wonderful excuse for not attending them:

ALGERNON. Do you know, I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night after all.

LADY BRACKNELL. I hope not, Algernon.

ALGERNON. Yes, it is a great bore, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. They seem to think I should be with him. I have promised to go down by the 6.40 from King’s Cross.¹⁹⁶

What is more, in Algernon’s view, everyone who leads a double life is a “Bunburyist.” Accordingly, Jack fits the definition perfectly. Nonetheless, when Algernon, himself a proud Bunburyist, calls him “one of the most advanced Bunburyists”¹⁹⁷ he knows, Jack resolutely refuses to be called so, because he does not consider himself this kind of person at all, which proves his hypocrisy.

Naturally, like Sir Robert Chiltern, Jack does not want to be exposed, for it would discredit him publicly. Besides, his flights to London would be over. In contrast to Jack, Algernon’s disclosure would not be that severe for him. In fact, Algernon acquired a great social status primarily on the basis of his relation to upper-class Lady Bracknell. Moreover, his relatives already know about some of his shortcomings such as unpaid debts, and therefore they would not probably be surprised by another of his tricks. Thus, Algernon’s exposure as a

¹⁹⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 14.

¹⁹⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 10.

liar would probably mean only his regular attendance at Lady Bracknell's dinner parties and other social events.

Concerning hypocrisy and other upper-class vices, Lady Bracknell should be introduced as well. Lady Bracknell is an affluent, upper-class woman who lives with her husband, Lord Bracknell, and their daughter, Gwendolen, in London's West End. In fact, Lady Bracknell, as she herself admits, was not always a member of the leisured class: "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of letting that stand in my way."¹⁹⁸ But she adopted role of rich lady very quickly. She is snobbish, arrogant and looks down on anyone who does not belong to her social class. As an example, she calls middle-class Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, "a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education."¹⁹⁹ In contrast, she is full of praise for the high society in which she moves and claims that only people who cannot get into the society speak disrespectfully of it.²⁰⁰ Besides being intolerant, judgemental and conceited, Lady Bracknell is authoritative, domineering, and ruthless as well. Among victims of her behaviour is also her husband, though it was solely his social rank that secured her current privileged position.

According to Schomp, the Victorian world was dominated by men. At home the man was "the king of the castle"—whether that "castle" was a gorgeous city mansion, a cosy suburban terrace house, or a cramped tenement apartment—and his wife devoted her life to making a happy home for her family.²⁰¹ Mitchell supports this fact by asserting that Victorian women were trained to please men and suppress their own wants.²⁰² Accordingly, Lady Bracknell should deeply respect her husband as a true master of the household and take care of him. Instead, Lord Bracknell is ignored, oppressed, and treated like a puppet. To be more specific, when Algernon, Lady Bracknell's nephew, decides not to come to her dinner party, she seems rather upset and admits that in this case, Lord Bracknell will not be present at the table: "I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that."²⁰³ It implies that Lord Bracknell is left dining alone quite often, and that her guests are more important to her than her own man. Furthermore, after Gwendolen's running away to Jack, her suitor, Lady Bracknell does not even bother with telling him the truth:

¹⁹⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 97.

¹⁹⁹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 103.

²⁰⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 97.

²⁰¹ Schomp, *The City*, 37, 47.

²⁰² Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 267.

²⁰³ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 14.

Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture at the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought. I do not propose to undeceive him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong.²⁰⁴

Thus, it seems that deceiving her husband is a fairly common thing for her, and that she has total disrespect of him. What is more, calling him “unhappy,” Lady Bracknell indicates that she knows perfectly how he feels about being treated like an incompetent person. Yet, she continues in reducing her husband to an absolute wreck, which proves her cruelty.

Naturally, the way Lady Bracknell, “whose views on education are remarkably strict,”²⁰⁵ has brought Gwendolen up considerably influenced Gwendolen’s thinking and opinions, including opinion of her father. Knowing of the fact that owing to unsympathetic treatment, Lord Bracknell spends most of the time hidden away, Gwendolen supposes that Cecily Cardew, to whom she introduces herself, has never heard of her father, although he is a wealthy aristocrat:

Outside the family circle Papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don’t like that.²⁰⁶

It is apparent that Lady Bracknell is the direct opposite of the virtuous, obedient wife whose major aim is to please her husband, as well as Lord Bracknell is the exact reverse of the authoritative, self-confident “king of the castle” mentioned above. Generally, timorous Lord Bracknell and his despotic wife are the very opposites to accepted Victorian gender roles represented, for instance, by the Chilterns in *An Ideal Husband*, and to happy family life, example of which was set by Queen Victoria, her husband, Prince Albert, and their children.

As mentioned before, Lady Bracknell married well and she wants to see her daughter do the same. Therefore, she prepared a list of eligible young bachelors. However, Jack’s name, the man that Gwendolen is in love with, is not included. For that reason, Lady Bracknell puts him through a series of questions, such as whether he smokes, how old he is, or what his policies are. And she does not forget to emphasize that his potential engagement to her daughter depends entirely on whether his answers will be “what a really affectionate mother requires.”²⁰⁷ Obviously, what Lady Bracknell requires of a possible son-in-law is a good

²⁰⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 92.

²⁰⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 74.

²⁰⁶ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 74.

²⁰⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 20.

name, high social standing, and large amount of property. In fact, Lady Bracknell is quite satisfied with Jack's answers until she asks about his family background and learns that he knows nothing about his origin, because as a baby, he was found in a handbag in the cloak-room at Victoria station:

Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life [...] As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.²⁰⁸

Since family prestige is, from Lady Bracknell's view, one of the topmost qualities, she adamantly refuses to accept "a parcel" of unknown origin, as she pejoratively labels Jack, as her possible son-in-law, and specifically orders him "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 season is quite over,"²⁰⁹ if he wants to see his name on her list. Her arguments against Jack are, of course, ludicrous, for Jack is a respectable gentleman and recognized member of the gentry, though he does not know anything about his parents. Thus, Jack, too, is a victim of Lady Bracknell's snobbism and supreme arrogance.

The situation complicates even more when Algernon informs Lady Bracknell, his aunt, of his engagement to Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward. Lady Bracknell is shocked but willing to interview Jack about Cecily's background. However, this time she starts her routine inquiry with a cutting remark about her interest in whether Cecily is at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London. "Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons, whose origin was a terminus,"²¹⁰ she adds, alluding to Jack's social origin again. Because of her strong antipathy towards Jack, Lady Bracknell is prejudiced also against Cecily. For example, she considers Cecily's dress "sadly simple" and her hair "almost as Nature might have left it."²¹¹ Moreover, none of Jack's answers is good enough for her:

JACK. [*in a clear, cold voice.*] Miss Cardew is the grand-daughter of the late Mr Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W., Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey, and the Sporran, Fifeshire, N.B.

LADY BRACKNELL. That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspire confidence. But what proof have I of their authenticity?

²⁰⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 23-24.

²⁰⁹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 24.

²¹⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 94.

²¹¹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 96.

JACK. [*with an elaborate bow*] I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the Period. They are open to your inspection, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL. [*grimly*] I have known strange errors in that publication.

JACK. [*very irritably*] [...] I have also in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, registration, baptism, whooping-cough, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles, both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL. Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see; though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favour of premature experiences.²¹²

Nevertheless, the moment Lady Bracknell learns that Cecily would bring a substantial dowry the prejudice vanishes:

A moment, Mr Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand! And in the Funds! [*sitting down again*] Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces.²¹³

Furthermore, she immediately gives her consent to their marriage and insists on the soonest possible wedding date, for "long engagements [...] give people the opportunity of finding out their true characters before marriage, which [...] is never advisable,"²¹⁴ she explains. In reality, Lady Bracknell knows very well that her nephew is in debts and the fortune Cecily would bring to the marriage would save him and so the whole family from a bad reputation or, worse, possible scandal. Generally, Lady Bracknell perceives marriage solely as a profitable economic transaction. As she sees it, marriage should provide a person with social security and wealth, and therefore love and affection is not important. Thus, when she later claims that she does not approve of "mercenary marriages,"²¹⁵ it proves her calculating and cunning character.

In conclusion, throughout the play, Lady Bracknell moralizes about engagement, marriage, society, taste, money, respectability, education, health and death, pretending to be a shining example of how to behave. However, she does not hesitate to deceit and abuse all the people around her, including her husband and her daughter, in order to get what she wants, particularly high social status and leisured, carefree life. In brief, Lady Bracknell, like Sir Robert Chiltern, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, is a hypocrite because she pretends to be morally virtuous while being deceitful, cunning, and ruthless.

²¹² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 94-95.

²¹³ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 96.

²¹⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 97.

²¹⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 97.

As for the Victorian gentleman, his qualities, as well as ideal qualities of his wife, were already mentioned. Nevertheless, it should be also noted that characteristics such as foppishness, exaggerated genteel manners, and levity were despised, Mitchell contends.²¹⁶ After all, this fact was already referenced to by Gwendolen, who emphasized that she does not like effeminate men. In fact, these characteristics are typical of a figure of the dandy. Significantly, Oscar Wilde, himself a rebel against the old Victorian conventions chose the pose of Aesthetic dandy who “put only his talent into his work, but his genius into his life,” as Calloway highlights.²¹⁷ Danson enriches Calloway’s point by assuming that “Wilde’s dandyism, in his life and work, had always been a rebuke to the Victorian ideal of manly productivity,” as well as his approach to life had always been a thorn in Victorian moralists’ side.²¹⁸

Cave defines the dandy as “a man whose thoughts and behaviour seem centred on dress, witty repartee, aesthetic pleasures and all-consuming leisure.”²¹⁹ He dominates not only by wit and manipulation of words, but also by self-assurance, and he defines the fashionable and the modern, as Raby suggests.²²⁰ All this embodies *An Ideal Husband*’s Lord Goring, whom Wilde describes as:

Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.²²¹

Throughout the play, Lord Goring is always dressed in the height of fashion. Besides proper dress he wears a silk hat, Inverness cape, white gloves; he carries a Louis Seize cane and never forgets about a buttonhole, which he changes several times a day. Moreover, one sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it:

Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear. [...] Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people. And falsehoods the truths of other people. [...] Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself. [...] To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance, Phipps.²²²

²¹⁶ Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 271.

²¹⁷ Calloway, “Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses,” 51-52.

²¹⁸ Lawrence Danson, “Wilde as Critic and Theorist,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 89.

²¹⁹ Richard A. Cave, “Wilde’s Comedies,” in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 222.

²²⁰ Peter Raby, “Wilde’s Comedies of Society,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 150-151.

²²¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 7.

²²² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 45-46.

In addition, Goring is an eternal optimist who lives entirely for pleasure and spends most of his time attending receptions, going to the opera, to balls and gentlemen's clubs, lounging in an armchair, or standing by a fireplace with his hands in his pockets and philosophizing about beauty, happiness, life, and love:

I am not a Pessimist. Indeed I am not sure that I quite know what Pessimism really means. All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next.²²³

As a true dandy and narcissist, he enjoys looking at himself in the mirror while arranging an appropriate necktie, and he is very self-confident: "My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don't know, tells Goring to his friend Sir Robert Chiltern."²²⁴ However, his father, Lord Caversham, himself a respectable Knight of the Garter and a symbol of an older generation of London Society, does not approve of Goring's idle way of life and even calls him "good-for-nothing-son," for he knows nothing about practical life by experience.²²⁵ He repeatedly chastises his son for lacking responsibility towards the serious matters of life, particularly marriage, and for not situating himself in the centre of things, where to Lord Caversham the "centre" means politics. The problem is that Lord Goring, who delights in a life of cultivated pointlessness and other aesthetic pleasures, finds politics dull and demoralizing. Therefore, he is annoyed any time the newspapers publishes boring political information at the expense of hot social news: "By the way, Lady Chiltern, there is no list of your guest in *The Morning Post* of today. It has apparently been crowded out by the County Council, or the Lambeth Conference, or something equally boring. Could you let me have a list?"²²⁶ All their conversations on the topic of family life and politics are dominated by Lord Goring, who has an answer for everything and shows himself capable of dealing with any eventuality:

LORD CAVERSHAM. Want to have a serious conversation with you, sir.

LORD GORING. My dear father! At this hour?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, sir, it is only ten o'clock. What is your objection to the hour? I think the hour is an admirable hour!

LORD GORING. Well, the fact is, father, this is not my day for talking seriously. I am very sorry, but it is not my day.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What do you mean, sir?

²²³ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 33.

²²⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 29.

²²⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 2.

²²⁶ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 34.

LORD GORING. During the Season, father, I only talk seriously on the first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, make it Tuesday, sir, make it Tuesday.

LORD GORING. But it is after seven, father, and my doctor says I must not have any serious conversation after seven. It makes me talk in my sleep.²²⁷

Finally, his nerves of steel and ever-alert intelligence help to save his best friend's marriage and so his glittering political career, because in case of divorce Sir Robert Chiltern would not be that honoured politician any more. Thus, on the one hand, Lord Goring proves to be a self-centred idler who rejects Society's ideals of duty, responsibility and respectability, but at the same time, he is a virtuous gentleman and a reliable, helpful friend who does not hesitate to do the right thing.

Another dandy philosopher is *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Algernon Moncrieff. Similarly, this charming bachelor lives in a luxurious and artistically furnished flat and devotes all his time to pleasure, physical appearance, gourmet food, and visits:

MERRIMAN. Mr. Ernest's luggage, sir. I have unpacked it and put it in the room next to your own.

JACK. His luggage?

MERRIMAN. Yes, sir. Three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.

ALGERNON. I am afraid I can't stay more than a week this time.²²⁸

Wilde describes him as "very gay and debonair,"²²⁹ which means that he never leaves home without modern dress, a button-hole and a matching necktie, and he always pays attention not to smear his cuffs with butter when eating his favourite muffins. Besides, he does not hesitate to criticize dress of other people, even that of his relatives' or best friend, which often makes him an irritating kibitzer: [to his best friend Jack] "Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. [...] Why on earth don't you go up and change? [...] I call it grotesque. [...] I never saw anybody to take so long to dress, and with such little result."²³⁰

Like Goring, Algernon is extraordinarily clever, but also vain and self-assured: "If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated,"²³¹ he boasts to Jack. In addition, he never misses the opportunity of reusing a well-turned phrase, and he is a master of words:

²²⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 47.

²²⁸ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 49-50.

²²⁹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 39.

²³⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 58.

²³¹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 58.

LADY BRACKNELL. Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON. I'm feeling very well, Aunt.

LADY BRACKNELL. That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together.²³²

Nevertheless, unlike Goring Algernon is selfish, for he uses his shrewdness only to his own benefit, and amoral, leading a double life and recognizing no other duty than the responsibility to live beautifully.

To summarize, both dandies are characterized by self-confidence, intelligence, ingenuity, eloquence, love of art and fashion, "playing with the world" around them, and leisured, lazy way of life. In fact, they serve as bearers of Wilde's aesthetic creed emphasizing distinction, singularity, pleasure and modern art of living, and thus rebellion against old Victorian conventions and ideals. It proves that Wilde desired a world free from social intolerance and the oppression of prescribed behaviour and thought.

²³² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 12.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this bachelor thesis was to point to amorality of the Victorian upper-class, which was heavily criticized by Oscar Wilde in his comedies *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. At first, the bachelor thesis was commenced by the historical background, which provided an insight into the general characteristics of the Victorian period. Further, it highlighted some of the most significant historical events, which concurrently appeared in the selected works and affected the characters' lives. To be more specific, the impact of the Industrial Revolution, working-class challenge, women issue, technological and scientific development, invention of mass literature, and the British Empire were discussed.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural background initially proved the key importance of appertaining to a certain social class and of conforming to the rules for the class. For example, wealthy heiress Cecily Cardew is not allowed to help her servant with the watering of flowers in the garden. In addition, aristocratic Lady Bracknell refuses to read a middle-class book, and her nephew, Algernon Moncrieff, rejects to be imprisoned in the middle-class suburbs. Then, individual social classes were described and supplemented with the specific examples of *An Ideal Husband's* and *The Importance of Being Earnest's* characters. On the whole, the selected works cover all social classes—the upper class, middle class, and working class. Nevertheless, the upper-class members predominate, and therefore the last part of the chapter provided more detailed information about their way of life, particularly about the London season and the marriage market.

The third chapter presented the literary context of the selected plays. To be more precise, it explored British drama in the 1890s, when *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* were written and produced; public perceptions of Oscar Wilde's work; the distinctions between him and G. B. Shaw, his contemporary; and the Aesthetic Movement. In addition, the classification of the selected works was outlined as well. In the broader sense, they belong to the genre of comedy, for their goal is to interest and amuse their audience, and they have a happy ending. Further, they are classified as a comedy of manners, Victorian melodrama, farce, and satire. Besides other typical features, they examine universe where all values are bound up with appearances; a scandal, coincidences, and exciting events are parts of the plot; they employ stock characters or caricatured character-types such as the noble hero, the long-suffering heroine, and the cold-blooded villain; and they use verbal wit, repartee, and puns.

Finally, the last chapter of this bachelor thesis is focused on the analysis of Victorian society, notably its morality. The moral values differed according to the social class to which a person pertained. For instance, the skilled workers and members of the lower middle class believed in self-denial, self-help, and hard work. Other middle-class values were self-control, thrift, earnestness, honour, sense of duty, etc. Importantly, stricter moral standards in the middle class influenced both the respectable working class and the upper class. As a result, affluent society began promoting charity and social welfare work, which is reflected also in *An Ideal Husband*, though solely within younger generations. Another valued feature was respectability. In the selected plays, there appear many respectable ladies and gentlemen, such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*'s Lady Bracknell, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, and *An Ideal Husband*'s Sir Robert Chiltern. To be more specific, Lady Bracknell is a caring mother who wants the best for her daughter; Sir Robert is a honourable politician who regularly donates to charities; Jack is a respected landowner who constantly travels to the city to get his irresponsible brother out of some trouble; and Algernon is a sensible bachelor who often travels to the country in order to look after his invalid friend. However, in reality, all of them are hypocrites: Lady Bracknell abuses her family to get what she wants, particularly privileged social position and luxury; Sir Robert contributes to charity in order not to feel bad about his shameful past; and Jack's fictional brother and Algernon's made-up invalid serve as their alibi for neglecting their duties and pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, upper-class hypocrisy is the object of Wilde's heavy criticism, as well as the social intolerance and oppression, which is criticised through his dandy characters, Lord Goring and Algernon Moncrieff.

RESUMÉ

Tato práce pojednává o jednom z nejvýznamnějších období v dějinách Velké Británie— viktoriánské době. Toto období je nazýváno podle královny Viktorie, která nastoupila na trůn v roce 1837 po smrti svého strýce Viléma IV. a vládla až do své smrti roku 1901. Na trůnu tedy strávila neuvěřitelných 63 let, během kterých došlo v Británii k mnoha převratným změnám, jež přirozeně měly obrovský vliv na život všech obyvatel a jež byly předzvěstí zrodu nové, moderní doby.

Jednou z charakteristik viktoriánské Anglie bylo prosazování a dodržování přísných morálních hodnot, společenských pravidel a zásad etikety, které se odrážejí i v dílech Oscara Wildea *Ideální manžel* a *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa*. Přestože sám Oscar Wilde se pohyboval v nejvyšších společenských kruzích a rád si užíval luxusu, stal se zároveň kritikem morálních postojů a zásad, kterými se tito lidé řídili, protože v sobě často skrývaly pokrytectví a další negativní lidské vlastnosti. Cílem této práce bylo poukázat na tuto kritiku ve výše uvedených Wildeových hrách.

První kapitolou této práce je historické pozadí viktoriánské doby. Je nutné poznamenat, že Viktoriiny začátky jako královny nebyly jednoduché, protože byla velice mladá a její pravomoci značně omezené. Svým zájmem o státní záležitosti si ale nakonec dokázala svůj lid získat a na jubilejní oslavě v roce 1887 byla na vrcholu popularity. Po skončení průmyslové revoluce se Británie stala světovou velmocí, která v Evropě neměla konkurenci, a proto byla také nazývána „dílňou světa.“ Z těchto úspěchů však měly užitek hlavně vyšší třídy obyvatelstva, zatímco životní úroveň dělnické třídy se zlepšovala pomaleji. Jedním z fenoménů viktoriánského období byla urbanizace, během níž počet obyvatel měst vzrostl o 50% a z původně zemědělské země se tak stala země průmyslová. Růst průmyslových měst na jedné straně znamenal více pracovních příležitostí, ovšem na straně druhé s sebou přinášel mnoho problémů, protože města nebyla na takový nápor lidí a průmyslu připravená. Levné bydlení pro dělníky v blízkosti továren zajišťovaly nahuštěné domky bez tekoucí vody a kanalizace, kde se začaly rychle šířit smrtelné nemoci. Dalším problémem bylo vykořisťování továrních dělníků, již za náročnou práci v otřesných podmínkách dostávali jen minimální mzdu. Ovšem asi nejhorším počinem viktoriánské doby bylo nehumánní zacházení s ženami a dětmi z dělnické třídy. Ženy byly nuceny vykonávat stejně náročnou práci jako muži za mnohem nižší plat a děti od 5 let věku byly běžně zaměstnávány v dolech či továrnách. Šokujícím zjištěním bylo to, že i poté, co tyto alarmující skutečnosti vypluly na povrch, se

lidé z nižších společenských tříd setkávali s lhostejností ze strany příslušníků tříd vyšších, kteří žili ve zcela odlišném světě a nejevili zájem se touto problematikou zabývat. Příkladem této lhostejnosti je nesoucité chování lorda Goringa vůči květinářce. Pracovní podmínky i životní úroveň dělnické třídy se začaly postupně zlepšovat, a to díky novým zákonům týkající se pracovní doby, zdraví, vzdělávání, legalizace odborů, rozšíření volebního práva a omezení dětské práce.

Ženy obecně to v tehdejší době měly velice složité, protože neměly prakticky žádná práva. Postavení žen všech společenských tříd se snažily zlepšit různé feministické spolky, přičemž v jednom z nich působí i lady Chilternová v *Ideálním manželovi*. Tyto snahy nakonec přinesly ovoce a ženy mohly např. začít studovat na nově postavených školách a univerzitách, i když zatím bez titulu. Důležitým milníkem z hlediska postavení žen byly také zákony umožňující nakládání s jejich vlastními penězi a zákony umožňující snadnější rozvod. Viktoriánská doba byla zlomová i pro doposud suverénní aristokracii, která, přestože si nadále zachovávala svou vlastní kulturní identitu, přišla o své suverénní ekonomické a politické postavení. Přispěla k tomu již zmíněná urbanizace, rozšíření volebního práva mezi nižší vrstvy a zemědělská krize, jež Velkou Británii zasáhla v pozdních letech 19. století. Špatnou zemědělskou situaci rozebírají také lady Bracknellová s Jackem Worthingem v *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*.

Ve viktoriánské době byla Británie průmyslovou a technologickou velmocí. Byla zde vybudována hustá železniční síť, která, mimo jiné, umožnila milionům lidí navštívit Velkou světovou výstavu v Londýně v roce 1851, která se stala oslavou britské nadvlády. Železniční doprava hraje důležitou roli i v životech hrdinů ve zvolených Wildeových hrách. Nepostradatelnou je např. pro Jacka Worthinga a Algernona Moncrieffa v *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*, kteří neustále „pendlují“ mezi městem a venkovem. Dalším významným prvkem v jejich životech jsou knihy a tisk, jež celkově nabyly na významu i popularitě. Pro nejvyšší společenskou vrstvu však byly nejdůležitější knihy o etiketě, aristokratické ročenky a noviny, jež jim poskytovaly žádoucí informace. Život jim obohacovaly a usnadňovaly mnohé nové vědecké objevy a vynálezy jako např. telefon, fonograf, telegraf, elektrické osvětlení či metro v Londýně. K velkému pokroku došlo i v medicíně, kde se již používaly vylepšené mikroskopy, dezinfekce a díky Florence Nightingalové se o pacienty staraly vyškolené zdravotní sestry.

V 19. století byla Británie také největší koloniální mocností. Její impérium rozlohou zabíralo jednu pětinu zemského povrchu a příslušela k němu čtvrtina celkového počtu

obyvatel světa. Impérium přirozeně nebylo rozšiřováno jen mírovou cestou, a proto byla země prakticky neustále zapojena do menších či větších bojů a válek. Jedním z důvodů pro rozšiřování impéria byl rychle se zvyšující počet obyvatel. Část obyvatelstva, obzvláště příslušníci nejvyšších společenských kruhů, včetně lady Markbyové v *Ideálním manželovi*, viděla jasné řešení v nucené emigraci. Výsledkem byl velký nárůst počtu obyvatel v Kanadě, Austrálii a na Novém Zélandě. Nejvýznamnější britskou kolonií ale byla Indie, a proto byl o místní službu, jež byla považována za prestižní, velký zájem. Sloužil zde např. generál Moncrieff, švagr lady Bracknellové v *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa*. Neměl by být opomenut ani fakt, že silné impérium dávalo Britům pocit důležitosti, který bylo velice těžké zapomenout, když Velká Británie ztratila ve 20. století svou suverenitu.

Následující kapitola bakalářské práce se věnuje společensko-kulturnímu pozadí viktoriánské doby, které je zaměřeno na rozdělení společnosti do jednotlivých sociálních tříd, a jelikož drtivou většinu postav ve zvolených Wildeových hrách tvoří příslušníci nejvyšší společenské třídy, druhá část této kapitoly podává informace o jejich způsobu života. Viktoriánská doba se vyznačovala jasně vymezeným systémem sociálních tříd, jenž je striktně dodržován i v dílech *Ideální manžel* a *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa*. Sociální třídu člověka neurčoval jen jeho původ a profese, ale také zdroj jeho příjmu a rodinné konexe. Příslušnost k určité třídě se odrážela zcela ve všem—od chování, přes zvyky a hodnoty, až po místo bydliště. Jak již bylo naznačeno, každá třída měla své zásady a očekávalo se, že příslušníci dané třídy se jimi budou řídit. Chovat se jako příslušník jiné třídy, ať už vyšší či nižší, bylo dokonce považováno za krajně nevhodné. Z tohoto důvodu v *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa* guvernanka, slečna Prismová, okřikuje svou žačku Cecílii, která se rozhodla pomoci sluhovi se zaléváním květin na zahradě. Třídní systém se obecně skládal ze tří sociálních tříd. Nejvyšší třídu tvořili nesmírně bohatí aristokraté a o něco méně bohatá nižší šlechta, přičemž příjem obou těchto skupin pocházel zejména z pronájmu jejich půdy. Ze zástupců této společenské vrstvy, která v obou dílech tvoří převážnou většinu, lze jmenovat např. Jacka Worthinga, lady Bracknellovou a jejich příbuzné v *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa* a Chilternovy, hraběte z Cavershamu, vikomta Goringa a hraběnku z Basildonu v *Ideálním manželovi*.

Střední třída se skládala z lidí, kteří pracovali „hlavou.“ Na vrcholku této třídy byli lidé pracující v oblasti práva, bankovníctví a medicíny, armádní a námořní důstojníci, univerzitní profesori či anglikánští duchovní. Zařadili se sem i velkoobchodníci a továrníci, již zbohatli v důsledku průmyslové revoluce. Nižší vrstvu střední třídy představovali obchodníci, vojáci, policisté, guvernanky, učitelé atd. Přestože důležitost střední třídy ve viktoriánském období

vzrostla, její představitelé se ve zvolených dílech příliš neobjevují. Jako příklad lze uvést pouze guvernanku slečnu Prismovou, právníka pana Gribbyho a faráře Cheasubleho v *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* a tajemníky Roberta Chilterna, pány Trafforda a Montforda, v *Ideálním manželovi*.

Poslední třídou objevující se, i když opět jen v malé míře, ve vybraných Wildeových hrách je dělnická třída, tedy lidé, kteří si na živobytí vydělávali manuální prací. Na vrcholku této třídy byli kvalifikovaní dělníci, nicméně většinu tvořili dělníci s částečnou či žádnou kvalifikací. Zástupci dělnické vrstvy se v obou dílech objevují pouze v podobě služebnictva zaměstnaného v domech šlechty.

Pro šlechtu byla nejdůležitějším obdobím roku tzv. Londýnská sezóna, která trvala od května do srpna. Na tyto měsíce se šlechtické rodiny z celé země sjely do Londýna, kde se konaly honosné recepce, bály, večírky a sportovní akce. Avšak nejednalo se jen o zábavu, společenské akce totiž sloužily také k utužování obchodních vztahů, uzavírání nových obchodů a sjednávání sňatků. Pokud šlo o sňatek, rodiče nebrali ohledy na to, koho si jejich potomci vybrali. Hlavními atributy bylo uchazečovo postavení ve společnosti a výše jeho majetku. Typickým příkladem je Gwendolínina situace v *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*: Gwendolína je zamilovaná do Jacka a chce si ho vzít, avšak její matka, lady Bracknellová, jejich zasnuby „zatrhne,“ protože Jackův původ se jí nezdá dostatečně na úrovni.

Třetí kapitola zasazuje zvolená díla do literárního kontextu. Nejprve se stručně zabývá rozdíly mezi Oscarem Wildem a G.B. Shawem, již oba obohatili anglickou dramatickou tvorbu. Wildeovy postavy zosobňují a zesměšňují divadelní stereotypy, zatímco Shawovi hrdinové slouží jako nástroj politického osvícení a sociální reformy. Dále se věnuje kritice, které Wilde musel čelit. Mnozí ho kritizovali za nedostatek originality a imitaci jiných autorů jako např. Clement Scott. Tato kritika pravděpodobně pramenila z „vypůjčování“ již obehnaných postav populárního divadla jako je žena s minulostí (paní Cheveleyová v *Ideálním manželovi*), nevinně idealistická mladá žena nucená čelit „špinavým“ skutečnostem politického a společenského života (lady Chilternová v *Ideálním manželovi*) a „švihák“ (*dandy*) (Algernon Moncrieff v *Jak je důležité míti Filipa*, lord Goring v *Ideálním manželovi*). Nechybí ani názory jednotlivých kritiků z premiérového uvedení obou her, jež byly přirozeně velice odlišné. Wilde byl jedním z hlavních představitelů „Estetismu“ (*Aestheticism*), který představoval nejen umělecký směr, ale také životní styl, a který se odráží i ve smýšlení jeho postav, především postavy šviháka. Tito lidé věřili, že umění a literatura mají hodnotu samy o sobě a nepotřebují tedy žádné morální ponaučení. Závěrečná část této

kapitoly se věnuje zařazení obou děl do vhodného žánru. Z obecného hlediska se *Ideální manžel* a *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa* řadí do žánru komedie, protože byly napsány za účelem pobavit diváka a mají šťastný konec. Dále jsou tyto hry klasifikovány jako společenské komedie, viktoriánské melodrama, *farce* a satira. Mimo jiné se hry odehrávají v prostředí plném povrchních lidí, kde jsou skandály, náhody a vzrušující události běžnou záležitostí. Vystupují zde také typické postavy jako např. šlechtný hrdina, dlouho sužovaná hrdinka či chladnokrevný padouch. Humor pak zajišťuje důvtip jednotlivých postav, vtipné pohotovité odpovědi, ironie a slovní hříčky.

Závěrečná kapitola této práce se zabývá analýzou viktoriánské společnosti ve zvolených dílech. Důraz je kladen hlavně na přísné morální hodnoty, zásady a postoje, které viktoriánská společnost přikazovala, ovšem ne všichni se jimi zcela řídili. Kvalifikovaní dělníci a lidé z nižší střední třídy např. věřili, že mohou změnit svůj život, a proto se řídili hodnotami jako svépomoc, sebezapření či tvrdá práce. Hodnotami typickými pro střední třídu byly: přísné sebeovládání, smysl pro povinnost, šetrnost a vážnost a upřímnost. Tyto jejich přísné morální zásady ostatně ovlivnily jak nižší, dělnickou, třídu, tak představitele třídy nejvyšší. Výsledkem bylo to, že šlechta začala podporovat charitu a jiné dobročinné organizace. Ovšem starší, konzervativní generace Londýnské společnosti toto příliš neschvalovaly. Další zásadou všech společenských tříd byla váženost. Zatímco dělník se ve své třídě stal váženým díky usilovné práci, muži z vyšších společenských vrstev museli být džentlmeny, přičemž džentlmenství bylo jejich způsobem života. Džentlmen byl zdvořilý, věrný, spravedlivý a vždy jednal podle svého nejlepšího morálního přesvědčení.

V obou zvolených hrách vystupuje mnoho vážených dam a džentlmenů, například sir Robert Chiltern v *Ideálním manželovi*, Jack Worthing, Algernon Moncrieff a lady Bracknellová v *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa*. Sir Robert Chiltern je příkladným manželem a významným politikem, který pravidelně přispívá velké částky na dobročinné účely. Jack Worthing je váženým vlastníkem půdy, jenž se stará jak o své zaměstnance, tak o 18letou Cecílii, jíž je poručníkem, a tedy dbá o její výchovu a vzdělávání. Často také cestuje do Londýna, aby pomohl svému nezodpovědnému bratrovi Ernestovi z nějaké nesnáze. Algernon Moncrieff je citlivý starý mládenec, který odjíždí na venkov za svým invalidním přítelem Bunburym pokaždé, když Bunbury onemocní, aby se o něj mohl starat. A lady Bracknellová je starostlivou matkou, která chce pro svou dceru jen to nejlepší. Avšak realita je zcela odlišná. Žádný z nich není tou vysoce morální osobou, za kterou se vydává. Přispíváním na charitu sir Robert pouze uplácí své svědomí, aby se necítil provinile za to, že jeho bohatství a

úspěch pocházejí z podvodu, který v minulosti spáchal. Jak Jackův problémový bratr, tak Algernonův invalidní přítel jsou pouze vymyšlené postavy, jež těmto dvěma slouží jako alibi pro pravidelné vycestování za zábavou, a tedy zanedbávání jejich společenských povinností. V neposlední řadě je nutné zmínit i nemorální chování lady Bracknellové, která v minulosti využila svého manžela, aby se dostala do nejvyšších pater společenského žebříčku, a nyní dělá to samé se svou dcerou, aby si toto společenské postavení udržela. Ke svému manželovi se celkově chová otřesně. Místo toho, aby ho respektovala jako „pána domu,“ ponižuje ho a zachází s ním jako s nesvéprávným. Tato manželská dvojice tedy zcela vybočuje z obecně uznávaného postavení muže a ženy ve viktoriánské době. Její manžel však není jedinou obětí jejího krutého a arogantního chování. To musí snášet i Jack, nápadník její dcery, a jeho schovanka, Cecilie. Z toho vyplývá, že všichni čtyři jsou pokrytci. Wilde zde kritizuje jak zkonstatělá pravidla viktoriánské společnosti, která k pokrytectví vedla, tak jednotlivce samotné.

Již zmíněná pravidla zcela opovrhovala zženštilostí a lehkovážností u mužů, tedy vlastnostmi, které jsou typické pro tzv. šviháky (*dandies*). Postava šviháka se objevuje v obou zvolených hrách—v *Ideálním manželovi* se jedná o lorda Goringa a v *Jak je důležité mítí Filipa* ho ztvárňuje Algernon Moncrieff. Oba dva se vyznačují velkým sebevědomím, inteligencí, bystrostí, důvtipem, výřečností, zájmem o módu a umění, ale také zahalečským způsobem života. Tyto postavy slouží jako nositelé Wildeova estetického přesvědčení, jež zdůrazňuje odlišnost, výjimečnost, zábavu a umění žít. Je nutné podotknout, že sám Oscar Wilde si v životě zvolil pózu „estetického šviháka,“ která se odrážela ve stylu jeho oblékání, bydlení i vydaných knih, a to jako protest právě proti viktoriánským společenským konvencím, pravidlům a ideálům. Prokazuje to, že Wilde toužil po životě osvobozeném od společenské netolerance a utlačování svobody člověka jeho „předepsanými“ způsoby chování a myšlení.

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