

Social Criticism in Oscar Wilde's Comedies (An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest)

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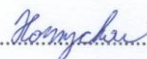
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ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se zabývá kritikou společnosti Oscara Wildea v jeho dvou komediálních hrách *Ideální manžel* (1895) a *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* (1895). Analyzuje problematiku, na níž se Wilde v jednotlivých dílech zaměřuje a způsob, jakým se jeho kritika projevuje. Práce dále vzájemně obě hry porovnává a definuje totožné a odlišné předměty autorovy kritiky.

Klíčová slova:

Oscar Wilde, estetika, kritika společnosti, Viktoriánské období, divadelní komedie, morálka, manželství, pokrytectví, společenské postavení, korupce, moc.

ABSTRACT

The thesis deals with Oscar Wilde's social criticism as reflected in two of his comedies *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). It analyses fundamental issues of Wilde's critical observation and a way in which the criticism is presented. Furthermore, the thesis compares both plays and determines identical and distinct subjects of Wilde's critical remarks.

Keywords:

Oscar Wilde, aestheticism, social criticism, Victorian era, dramatic comedy, morality, marriage, hypocrisy, social status, corruption, power.

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INTRODUCTION

The bachelor thesis deals with the issue of social criticism from Oscar Wilde's point of view as demonstrated in two of his comedies: *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It starts by a brief outline of Oscar Wilde's private life, including his lineage, childhood, studies, marriage, practice of homosexuality and subsequent imprisonment. Furthermore, his artistic life with respect to a dramatic production will be explored.

The thesis then continues with examining social criticism and its manifestation. In this regard, the theory of social criticism and its types will be expounded upon. At the same time, the concept of the Aesthetic Movement will be pursued. Even though the given works will be studied as subjects of Wilde's critical remarks, they also reflect principles of aestheticism. It may seem to be inadequate to connect these two concepts together. However, Oscar Wilde did so.

The relation between criticism, either literary or social or whichever, the type does not matter, and aestheticism, Wilde explains in his essay *The Critic as Artist* (1891). This critical essay contains essential thoughts concerning the relation between criticism and aestheticism as it is for instance demonstrated by following words: "Without the critical faculty there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name."¹ Further Wilde added: "An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all."² According to these beliefs, it is obvious that Wilde considered critical remarks to be principal attributes of any piece of art. Then, criticism and aestheticism go together and one simply cannot exist without the second.

When moving on throughout the thesis, cultural and literary contexts of analysed works will be then qualified. This includes historical circumstances and social issues of the period in which the plays happen and also in which they were written. From the literary point of view, a genre of the given works will be surveyed too.

Ultimately, but most significantly, the fundamental core will be examined as the particular features of Wilde's critical remarks will be defined. Each play will be analysed

¹ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 16.

² Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 18.

with respect to social observation that Oscar Wilde found upon Aristocratic Victorian society of 1890s.

As might be expected, the theory of social criticism will be mentioned in each plays for it keeps its primary role in the final part of the thesis. Moreover, as both works will be compared, we will identify identical and distinct features of Oscar Wilde's social criticism.

1 OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde – a prominent artist of English literary scene of the second half of the nineteenth century. A great poet, dramatist and also prose writer. Considered to be a real devotee of the beautiful, he became the central figure in the Aesthetic Movement. His personality is also connected with highly intellectual influences.³

Wilde's fetterless life and turning down moral values of traditional Victorians have shocked many on the one hand and have attracted others on the other hand. All these characteristics represent the figure of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde.

1.1 Personal Life

Originally Irish, Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin. He came from quite an influential background. Oscar's father, Sir William Wilde, was a reputable doctor. Besides, he was also a respectable expert on Irish culture and history, an antiquarian and chronicler of folklore.⁴ Oscar's mother, Jane Wilde, was an intellectual who contributed into revolutionary papers.⁵ Oscar Wilde descended from the family of three children. William, Oscar and Isola – these were daughter and sons of Wilde's kin.

Oscar's upbringing did not conform to traditional standards. Oscar and his older brother William were educated by life itself. No strict rules, no requirements. Both brothers were connected not only by the same approach to their upbringing. Northern Ireland's Portora Royal School was another and probably the last item they shared.

We are moving around the tenth year of Wilde's life. At this stage, the existence of distinctness started growing remarkably. He did not appreciate common boyish activities.⁶ Any kind of sport, trees climbing, taking part in wrangles or collecting of anything what boys usually collect. All these affairs meant nothing to Oscar. He preferred reading, liked flowers, their shapes and smell, loved watching sunset. All these things had one characteristic feature in common. They gave beauty to Oscar Wilde's life.

³ See Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, 133.

⁴ See Eagleton, introduction to *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, by Oscar Wilde, xiii.

⁵ See Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, 26.

⁶ See Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, 28.

October 1871. Seventeen-year-old Oscar was given an entrance scholarship at Trinity College in Dublin. He attended to the study of philology. Oscar was an excellent student – clever, skilful and above all interested. He was awarded by several distinctions during his studies at Trinity College. Nevertheless, the obtaining of a classical scholarship in 1874 and passing up Oxford meant a brilliant success for him.⁷

After several wild years, Oscar decided to mellow and settle down. He married Constance Mary Lloyd, a daughter of a rich Dublin lawyer, in 1884 and settled in Chelsea. Thanks to Constance's large wealth, Wilde could afford a high standard of living.⁸ The couple produced two children, sons. Their first son Cyril was born one year after their wedding in 1885. The second-born son Vyvyan was born a year later. At this period of Wilde's life, it seemed that he finally succeeded in taming himself. He desisted from his fads and became a newspaper editor of *The Woman's World*. He also wrote book reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and articles on the theatre for *The Dramatic Review*. It is true that Wilde's effort did not last long. He got bored with his job, fed up with his new conventional way of life. He reverted to his former world that he adored so much.

We are slowly moving towards an event that reorganized the way of Oscar Wilde's life hugely and it was an intimate affair with a male. It was in 1891 when Wilde met Alfred Douglas who was much younger than Wilde. Douglas was a poet and translator. It is true that he is still better known just as Oscar Wilde's lover. These two lived up to themselves, travelled a lot, enjoyed the rampancy of their lives and did not take into account a law of homosexuality. Their love affair was illegal because homosexuality was prohibited in England since 1885. However, neither Alfred nor Oscar intended to compromise with conventions of Victorian society. Wilde divorced his wife Constance in 1893. His pleasures were broken up two years after the divorce. In 1895, Wilde was charged with homosexuality and condemned to two years of the imprisonment and forced labour.

The punishment for practising homosexuality was expiated in 1897 and Oscar was released from Reading gaol. After that, the glamorous personality of Oscar Wilde never appeared again. He went to France and started to use a pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth.⁹ He died in Paris in November 1900.

⁷ See Hopkins, *Oscar Wilde: A Study of the Man and His Work*, 21.

⁸ See Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 40-41.

⁹ See Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 149.

1.2 Dramatic Heritage

Oscar Wilde's artistic life, with regard to his dramatic heritage, consists of five major works. In addition to the plays that are analysed in this thesis, further there are *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Salomé* and *A Woman of No Importance* in this field. It will be aimed at how these works were evaluated by both public and dramatic critics. With respect to this point, the attention will be primarily paid *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde's career of a real dramatist was started by *Lady Windermere's Fan* in autumn 1891 when he started elaborating it. The first run of this play took place in February 1892 at St. James's Theatre and "there was no doubt of its success from the start"¹⁰. In spite of the fact that former dramatic critics rather condemned it, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was appreciated favourably by the audience.

If we move ahead in chronological order, we are now approaching a period marked by *Salomé*. It is not clear in what language the play was originally written. Wilde probably started writing in English and then he was "at work turning his play laboriously into French."¹¹ *Salomé* was offered to be run at the Palace Theatre in London. Nevertheless, former existence of censorship postponed the favourable success of the play. In June 1892, Lord Chamberlain refused to grant the licence for running of it. This act was justified by the explanation that the play displayed biblical characters. It was at variance with the former law that should have suppressed Catholic mystery plays. As England was found hostile to *Salomé*, Wilde transferred it to France. The French version of this play was publicly released in February 1893. One year later, Lord Alfred Douglas – Wilde's lovers – translated the original into English. The opening night of *Salomé* took place in Paris in 1896. For England was inflicted by the censorship, British spectators had to wait for the first public performance of *Salomé* until 1931.

Wilde's dramatic heritage was further enriched in summer of 1892 when *A Woman of No Importance* was created. The public was given the first occasion to watch it at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in April 1893. Concerning achieved success, this play became a follower of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

¹⁰ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 223.

¹¹ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 226.

In January 1895, almost two years after the first run of *A Woman of No importance*, the opening performance of *An Ideal Husband* came to pass. The two plays shared two identical qualities. Both were performed at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket and both met the huge ovation from public. The first run of *An Ideal Husband* was honoured even by Prince of Wales himself who became enthusiastic about it.¹² With respect to dramatic criticism, the play encountered both success and sharp critique. Wilde was praised especially for his witticism, cleverness, trick of talk, whimsicality of dialogues, or dexterity. There was much commendation coming from the identical standpoint. Despite prevailing praise, theatre reviews dealing with the play also included words such as poor, sterile or even vulgar.¹³ Those critics particularly deplored Wilde's unrealistic perspective on society. He was blamed for presenting the public "with a false picture of life."¹⁴ Nonetheless, whatever negative was noted about this play, the favour of broad public remained unchanged.

That was probably Wilde's really creative period because during rehearsals of *An Ideal Husband*, a script for another play had already been composed. Polishing of what Wilde called his "somewhat farcical comedy"¹⁵ and what is known by its subtitle "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People"¹⁶ took just three weeks. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was completed in autumn 1895. This play started its victorious career immediately after its finishing. The first run followed the trace of Wilde's first famous play – it was introduced at the St. James's Theatre. "The reception of the play was phenomenal"¹⁷ and the audience gave the author a great honour. As well as *An Ideal Husband*, this comedy was awarded by highly honourable reviews too. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered to be Wilde's masterpiece that, however, closed Oscar Wilde's career of a reputable playwright.

¹² Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 247.

¹³ See Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, 195-210.

¹⁴ Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, 203.

¹⁵ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 252.

¹⁶ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 260.

¹⁷ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 257.

2 AESTHETIC MOVEMENT

The Aesthetic Movement is a term for a literary and artistic ideology of the late nineteenth century Europe. The Aesthetic Movement practises principles of aestheticism – a doctrine that thinks of the beautiful as an end in itself and tries to protect arts from “subordination to moral, didactic, cognitive or political purposes.”¹⁸ In literature, therefore, the sole intention of a literary work is to be beautiful, well-written and well-structured. Aestheticism is usually marked by the French phrase *l'art pour l'art* that is commonly used as *art for art's sake* in English.¹⁹

A fundamental suggestion for a birth of this phenomenon originated from a similar reason as any philosophical or political movement. It was because of a tendency to search for new values. However, this was not the only cause of birth of this ideology. It was created particularly “in opposition to the dominance of scientific thinking, and in defiance of the widespread indifference or hostility of the middle-class society”²⁰ that considered any art that did not spread moral values to be vain.

Oscar Wilde hugely contributed with his artistic theories concerning the Aesthetic Movement. Most of his aesthetic thoughts are summarized in the essay *The Decay of Lying* (1891) and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).²¹ The work that has been mentioned first contains well-known phrase “Art never expresses anything but itself”²² that accurately defines the paramount principle of aestheticism as it has been stated above.

We are already acquainted with the fact that aestheticism was a resistance movement towards convinced Victorian standards, especially towards its concept of morality. In response, Wilde assailed this issue in an apt principle that is laid down in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).²³ In the preface of this novel, Wilde pointed out that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”²⁴ This standpoint clearly shows Wilde's undermining attitude to Victorian sense of morality with respect to literary creation.

¹⁸ Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 5.

¹⁹ See Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4.

²⁰ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3.

²¹ See Kennedy, *English Literature, 1880-1905*, 67.

²² Wilde, “The Decay of Lying”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 98.

²³ See Kennedy, *English Literature, 1880-1905*, 68-69.

²⁴ Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 129.

2.1 Symbols of Aestheticism in Analysed Works

Though the thesis will explore the given works with respect to social criticism primarily, it is also possible to uncover particular symbols of aestheticism in their contexts. These symbols are represented chiefly by two key characters: Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* and Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Both Goring and Algernon are connected with the same role they possess within the plays. They represent a true dandy – a man who uses his wit “to shock and startle”²⁵ society while he himself remains impassive. A dandy is typical of his elegance that serves as a sign of the superiority of his spirit. Furthermore, a typical dandy is characterised by undermining moral principles and values. He insists on freedom and individualism, tends to be unique. However, what is most important about Wildean dandy, it is his aesthetic and moral conception. A dandy understands the aesthetic flaw to be a moral flaw.²⁶

When one would examine characters of the plays, it is feasible to discover these qualities just at the two already mentioned protagonists, Goring and Algernon. With no doubt, the characters represent aesthetic principles via their appearance as well as via their behaviour and manners.

Concerning *An Ideal Husband* firstly, Lord Goring is at the beginning of the third act described to be “in evening dress wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, make it indeed, and so masters it.”²⁷ Besides, Goring expresses disclaimer attitudes towards Victorian values and principles. He also meets another “requirement” of a dandy and it is his uniqueness. As it is depicted in the play, “he plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world.”²⁸

In the second play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, aestheticism is exhibited via Algernon Moncrieff. Although this character cannot be so tightly compared to Goring, there are some characteristic features that are similar. For instance, Algernon’s appearance, as it is indicated when he asks Cecily: “Might I have a buttonhole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.”²⁹ Similarly to Goring, Algernon expresses his

²⁵ Kumar, ed., *British Victorian Literature: Critical Assessments*, 486.

²⁶ See Kumar, ed., *British Victorian Literature: Critical Assessments*, 486-488.

²⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 54.

²⁸ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 12.

²⁹ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 508.

individualistic opinion and enjoyment of life. However, in comparison to Goring, the character of Algernon is more corrupted as he has no moral convictions at all.

In connection to aesthetic principles and a notion of a dandy, it cannot be unmentioned that these two characters mirror Oscar Wilde himself. Especially Goring does so. As the appearance of Goring was described above, we can imagine some of Wilde's pictures. However, it is not only the appearance that notices the aesthetic principles and exterior resemblance to Wilde. As many scholars argued that Lord Goring is a protagonist into whom Wilde "put a good deal of himself, a wit, a dandy, whose indolence, irresponsibility and sound common sense reflect similar qualities in his creator."³⁰ What is more, this fact was confirmed by Wilde himself when he once declared: "It contains a great deal of real Oscar."³¹ Lord Goring's uncommonness, elegance, pleasure of life or great entertainment – all these elements are weapons against prudent Victorian society used by Oscar Wilde himself.

³⁰ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 246.

³¹ Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 248.

3 BRIEF DETERMINATION OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

Social criticism is a common phenomenon of each society. Alternatively, we can consider it to be a phenomenon of the whole society if we take the society as one body, as one unit. Social criticism is a social activity that is performed either by individuals or by a group of people – critics who accomplish their points of particular social affairs publicly through moral arguments.³²

The concept of social criticism is conceived as a critique of social practises. In short, it analyses, defines and judges social behaviour, attitudes and patterns especially with respect to morality. Concerning broader interpretation that is, however, not primarily relevant to the subject matter of the thesis, social criticism examines institutions too.

3.1 Types

Classification of social criticism varies according to an approach of individual literary theorists. Although the aspect of the content is identical in most cases, titles of particular types are more or less different.

Juha Räikkä, a Finnish researcher of philosophy at University of Turku argues that there are three types of social criticism in literature: unmasking social criticism, sociological social criticism and principled social criticism. Though their basic characteristic feature is their mutual resemblance and closeness, they are after all clearly different.³³

The first type that will be briefly introduced is *unmasking social criticism*. This type of social criticism reveals the difference between “the interests that actually motivate action and the norms that individuals appeal to in justifying their actions.”³⁴ In other words, it unmasks people’s attitudes to what in fact determines their behaviour and actions. Its role is to uncover the real motives observed in particular social practises. Furthermore, it may require people to rectify their views concerning their motives, and ultimately “commit them to action that is both justified and motivated with regard to morally acceptable

³² See Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 35.

³³ See Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7-9.

³⁴ Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7.

reasons.”³⁵ Unmasking social criticism divides person’s motives into two fields, namely morally acceptable and morally blameworthy.³⁶

The second type is *sociological social criticism*. It is based on people’s behaviour and examines if we are able to judge it objectively. It means that sociological social criticism exposes distinctions in what people actually do and what they think they do.³⁷

Principled social criticism is the third type of social criticism and it is usually considered to be the most common type of social criticism. It takes two forms. First, it deals with moral principles and studies how people believe them. On the other hand, principled social criticism investigates the dissimilarity between recommended practises and practises which people actually use.³⁸

3.2 Social Criticism in Analysed Works

Concerning the given works, Oscar Wilde based his critical observation, as it will be studied later in the thesis, by force of comedy, especially by comedy of manners. He mocks the image of Aristocratic Victorian society, its manners, attitudes, values and ideals in *An Ideal Husband* as well as in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Therefore, Wilde’s concept of social criticism is carried out via witty dialogues, catchy epigrams, aphorisms and lucid wisdoms.

When one would examine the analysed plays, it is obvious that they are based on the same principle. Wilde used material images of stage to mirror their audience. The audience was well dressed, influential, wealth and well connected. As the plays were intended for London Aristocratic society, there is “an idle, luxuried community in an opulent environment of props and costumes”³⁹ reflected on the stage. However, the dialogue of the plays is enriched by creator’s critical observation. Thus, the dialogue not only reflects manners of audience but what is more, it carries a shadow of criticism that is thrown down on the audience.

³⁵ Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7.

³⁶ See Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7 – 9.

³⁷ Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7 – 9.

³⁸ Räikkä, “Social Criticism as a Social Practise,” 7 – 9.

³⁹ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 111.

Oscar Wilde's social awareness is evident for he lived in the period that became setting for his plays. He was familiar with the epoch not only because he lived in it but also because he himself was a member of upper-class society.

With regard to the theory of social criticism and its types, this subject will be further examined separately during analysis of each comedy.

4 CULTURAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS OF ANALYSED WORKS

Both cultural and literary contexts are identical for *An Ideal Husband* as well as for *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The cultural context of given works will be further examined from historical and social points of view. Central issues that come under these two umbrella terms are: Victorian age and nineteenth century Victorian society with its values, attitudes and patterns.

The role of literary context will be to demonstrate basic principles of relevant literary genre in which the works are set.

4.1 Victorian Age, Victorianism

Considering a historical context of given works, we are reaching Victorian age, in which, as it has been already pointed out, both analysed plays are not only set but in which both plays were written too.

A term Victorian age is applied to describe almost the whole of the nineteenth century in England. It is derived from the period of Queen Victoria's reign. In 1837, Queen Victoria came to the throne and ruled the country up to her death in 1901. There is no doubt that Great Britain underwent the most significant changes during her reign. Although she was less powerful than previous monarchs – because of the growth of parliamentary government – she reached fantastic goals.

Victorian age was the period of rapid economic growth, further colonial expansion, huge industrial power, financial and sea power. There was a new tendency of leaving the countryside for cities that led to the great population growth especially in London and other major cities in Great Britain. This fact “marked a final stage in the change from a way of life based on the land to a modern urban economy based on manufacturing, international trade and financial institutions.”⁴⁰ Britain introduced significant inventions such as steam power that helped to launch railways and ships fast, the telephone and the efficient postal

⁴⁰ Carter and McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*, 249.

service were developed too. At that time Britain was the strongest world authority for the first and the last era ever.⁴¹

Nonetheless it was not only economic progress that modified the face of former England so much. The country was also shaped socially by what is generally characterized as Victorian values. These values such as “moral probity, religious orthodoxy, sexual reverse, hard work and a confident belief in personal and historical progress”⁴² played fundamental role in lives of nineteenth century Victorian society. Victorian period was also an age of structural changes inside society when the influence, power and wealth of middle and upper classes started to grow remarkably. Furthermore, it was the age of social and political conflicts and anxieties. Women struggled for equal status and rights in such matters as franchise and proper education.⁴³

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Victorianism was getting into a stage when its values and principles were attacked and criticized by a number of thinkers and writers who themselves were members of this elite.

4.2 Dramatic Comedy

From the literary point of view, analysed works fall into a broad category of dramatic comedies. When one would study the works, it is possible to assume that the plays belong to three literary genres: comedy of manners, satiric comedy and farce comedy. All three types are mutually interconnected in *An Ideal Husband* as well as in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It is argued that *comedy of manners* is represented in the works most significantly. It reflects the sophisticated code of behaviour of fashionable circles of society, where appearances count for more than true moral characters. This literary genre is characterized by epigrammatic dialogues, repartees, verbal wit and frequent occurrence of aphorisms. Furthermore, it usually detects the self-interested cynicism of the characters that is masked by decorous pretence. As it was already indicated above, authors of comedies of manners are usually members of the social group that is the target of their critical observation.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Carter and McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*, 249-251.

⁴² Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, 465.

⁴³ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 338.

⁴⁴ See Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 39.

Another kind of comedy that is reflected in the plays is *satiric comedy*. It ridicules attitudes and political or social doctrines. Its role is to attack deviations from the accepted social order, standards of morals or manners.⁴⁵

Ultimately, the last genre that is mirrored in both plays is *farce comedy*. As Abrams declares, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is “a supreme example”⁴⁶ of this type of dramatic comedy. Such plays are typical for their structure “in which exaggerated character-types find themselves in ludicrous situations in the course of an improbable plot, but which achieve their comic effects not by broad humour and bustling action, but by the sustained brilliance and with of the dialogue.”⁴⁷

As the three subcategories of dramatic comedies were briefly examined, it is evident that it is just impossible to put the plays in one category, then, we must consider them to be interconnected.

⁴⁵ See Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 39.

⁴⁶ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 40.

⁴⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 40.

5 AN IDEAL HUSBAND ANALYSIS

Throughout the play, we can recognize several fundamental issues which became central to Wilde's critical remarks. In the following part of the thesis, then, we will identify the issue of marriage, hypocrisy and the issue of politics in the context of Victorian upper-class society of 1890s.

5.1 Issue of Marriage

The issue of marriage represents a central subject of Oscar Wilde's criticism. Throughout the play, Wilde attacks a principle of former marital status and this is wife's role within marriage. Thus, the work reveals two distinct beliefs and ideas about marriage that are rooted in thoughts of Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring. Alternatively, we can consider it to be the encounter of Victorian idealistic concept of marriage and Oscar Wilde's own perspective on it. In other words, the play uncovers two completely distinct antipoles of concept of marriage.

A Victorian woman – genuine wife was expected to fulfil certain qualities such as Lady Chiltern possesses in the play. She is an embodiment of a model woman. She is well educated, high-principled, loving and supportive of her husband – in personal way as well as in his career of a politician. Her husband is in her eyes seen as a man with strong personality, having “upright nature”⁴⁸ and not being able to “do anything base or underhand or dishonourable.”⁴⁹ She holds really a noble opinion of Robert Chiltern as demonstrated below:

You [Robert Chiltern] are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still.⁵⁰

As it is evident, Lady Chiltern provides her husband with great and even with an enormous moral perfection. And this is just the point of Wilde's critical observation in *An Ideal Husband*.

⁴⁸ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 26.

⁴⁹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 30.

⁵⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 29.

Wilde undermines the value of morality in Victorian marriage finding it to be hypocritical, unrealistic and above all exaggerated. Furthermore, his critical observation is guided by an opinion that women's love is not romantic. Instead of it, their love is driven by moral principles – it is morally rigid and high-principled.

What is more, Wilde pointed out that such a marriage leads to disappointment and disillusionments of both spouses. As the play proceeds, we can observe this clearly. After Lady Chiltern finds out that her husband's career was based on a swindle from the past, she is desperate and blames her husband:

You sold a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonour! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!⁵¹

Here, we can see Lady Chiltern suffering because her belief of the “ideal husband” was damaged. She would rather hear a lie instead of confessing that behaviour and action of her husband were immoral.

At the same time, her husband, Robert Chiltern, undergoes his own disillusionment, when he speaks to his wife gloomily:

Why can't you women love us [men], faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? . . . Women think that they are making ideal of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You [Lady Chiltern] made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. . . . Let women make no more ideals of men! let them not put them on alters and bow before them . . .⁵²

Obviously, Robert Chiltern tries to get rid of his assigned identity of a “false idol” that as he says, actually prevented him from revealing his wounds and weaknesses to his wife. Furthermore, the play unveils that he desires his wife's love and pardon for his immoral deed from the past.⁵³ This is evident when he states that “it is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 52.

⁵² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 53.

⁵³ See Kumar, ed., *British Victorian Literature: Critical Assessments*, 484.

⁵⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 53.

As it has been already noticed, the character of Lord Goring adopts quite a dissimilar attitude to marriage in comparison to Lady Chiltern. It is possible to suppose that Oscar Wilde's attitude is reflected just by mouth of Lord Goring. First of all, Goring represents rather a realistic perspective on marriage. He denounces women's idealistic views of marriage as well as their morally rigid love, assuming: "It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution."⁵⁵

Lord Goring finally makes a proposal to Mabel, sister of Robert Chiltern, who is pleased to marry him. This couple is quite the contrary to Chilterns. Goring and Mabel seem to be at the beginning of a frank and realistic relationship, possessing realistic attitudes and opinions. This fact is evident when Lord Goring thinks that he is not "nearly good enough" for Mabel who, however, replies to him: "I am so glad, darling. I was afraid you were."⁵⁶ Ultimately, the issue of an "ideal husband" is directly undermined by Mabel Chiltern's mouth when she says: "An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world."⁵⁷

There is even one more interesting element that is carried out via Lord Goring. His personality represents arbitration between Lady Chiltern and Robert Chiltern.⁵⁸

When we focus on the theory of social criticism, we could identify two characters that become central to the critical observation: Lady Chiltern and Robert Chiltern. Each of them represents different type of social criticism.

Concerning Lady Chiltern, the sociological social criticism is practised here. The critic, Oscar Wilde, exposes distinction in what Lady Chiltern actually performs and what she thinks she performs. To see the point more clearly: Lady Chiltern believes that she is supportive of her husband. In fact, her high opinion of him makes Robert Chiltern miserable and distressed.

On the other hand, Robert Chiltern's behaviour is described in the terms of principled social criticism. As this character is observed in various types, it is important to realize that we are now dealing with the issue of marriage. Then, we can notice that Robert Chiltern is

⁵⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 56.

⁵⁶ Wilde, *An Ideals Husband*, 80.

⁵⁷ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 92.

⁵⁸ See Kumar, ed., *British Victorian Literature: Critical Assessments*, 484.

unmasked as he does not obey moral practices as it is expected and as he claims to obey them at first.

5.2 Moral Hypocrisy

Another issue that Oscar Wilde points out in *An Ideal Husband* is hypocrisy of Victorian upper-class society. This is obvious already from his presentation of particular characters. Their behaviour is apparently artificial, unnatural and strained. They tend to put on a certain pose which they wish to have.

Their hypocrisy is felt not only through their dialogues. Wilde described their affectation in stage direction already.⁵⁹ It is directly illustrated for instance in Mrs. Marchmont's and Lady Basildon's introductory portrayals: "They are types of exquisite fragility. Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm."⁶⁰ Mrs. Cheveley is captured in the similar way as "a work of art on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools,"⁶¹ On the whole, the play records the picture of "society made up of established poses."⁶²

As it has been already mentioned above, Wilde demonstrates the two-faced behaviour of the society especially via dialogues. He reveals concrete forms of hypocritical behaviour through mouths of particular protagonists. Typically, they are conscious of their affected manners. They change opinions and attitudes in addition to their momentary needs and circumstances.

Alternatively, they are able to deny their own ideas and opinions that they passed a few seconds ago. A wonderful illustration of what has just been pointed out is caught in a following dialogue between Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon from the very beginning of the play:

MRS. MARCHMONT: Going on the Hartlocks' tonight, Margaret?

LADY BASILDON: I suppose so. Are you?

MRS. MARCHMONT: Yes. Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

⁵⁹ See Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 125-127.

⁶⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 4.

⁶¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 7.

⁶² Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 127.

LADY BASILDON: Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

MRS. MARCHMONT: I come here to be educated.

LADY BASILDON: Ah! I hate being educated!

MRS. MARCHMONT: So I do. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it?⁶³

As we can see, Mrs. Marchmont not only completely alters her judgement to be in conformity with her companion but moreover she begins affirming Lady Basildon's opinion. There are many of such dialogues within the play that illustrate what we can call *self-denial* and *self-deceit*. Giving one more example, it describes a situation when Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon find men selfish and arrogant because no man accompanied them for supper. However, when two gentlemen Vicomte de Nanjac and Mr. Montford offered ladies their companionship during supper, Lady Basildon rejected: "I never take supper, thank you, Vicomte." and Mrs. Montford follows by: "Thank you, Mr. Montford. I never touch supper."⁶⁴

Throughout the play, we could uncover another two-faced practise in which Wilde trapped his characters. And it is *pretence*. Wilde criticizes it directly, for instance by the mouth of Mrs. Cheveley while speaking to Sir Robert Chiltern:

In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues . . .⁶⁵

Concerning the theory of social criticism, the question of self-denial, self-deceit and pretence as they have been demonstrated so far, are understood in a concept of unmasking social criticism. Wilde uncovers real motives behind certain social behaviour of individual protagonists. In fact, they are seeking for moral prestige only in order to be given high opinion of their personality in public. This is their only concern which they worry about.

⁶³ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 4.

⁶⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 17.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 21.

5.3 Issue of Politics

In addition to social business, there is also a matter of politics in *An Ideal Husband*. With respect to the issue of politics, Wilde deals with themes such as wealth, power, corruption or blackmailing. These issues are dealt in a context of a fictional political affair that in fact reflects the real historical event that happened at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶

The central issue concerns the character of Sir Robert Chiltern, “Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and the way he acquired the wealth which allowed him to succeed by selling a state secret. This was by passing on privileged information about the Suez Canal to a European financier.”⁶⁷ Now, he has to withstand similar situation. He is blackmailed by Mrs. Cheveley to support fraudulent Argentine Canal scheme to be redeemed out of his past. Wilde’s fictional Argentine Canal scheme traces the Panama Canal Scandal that emerged in 1890s.

Within the play Wilde displays the society as desiring to gain “the possession of some form of power over other people,”⁶⁸ or furthermore he explores what an English socialist Beatrice Webb described by following words: “The most obvious form of power, and the most easily measurable, was the power of wealth.”⁶⁹ Further she added: “The dominant impulse was neither the greed of riches nor the enjoyment of luxurious living, though both these motives were present, but the desire for power.”⁷⁰

This illustration demonstrates London society of 1980s and that is exactly what Wilde set up his criticism upon.⁷¹ He shows the importance of wealth and power predominantly via Sir Chiltern’s voice as it may be proved in this excerpt: “What this century worships is wealth. The God of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one must have wealth.”⁷²

Wilde describes the importance of power as seen it to be the most important aspect of upper-class Victorian society. The ensuing excerpt, in which Robert Chiltern tells his story of becoming fascinated by power, proves this point pretty well:

⁶⁶ See Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 154.

⁶⁷ Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 154.

⁶⁸ Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, 50.

⁶⁹ Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, 50.

⁷⁰ Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, 54.

⁷¹ See Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 126.

⁷² Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 32.

One night after dinner at Lord Radley's the Baron began talking about success in modern life as something that one could reduce to an absolutely definite science. . . . he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. . . . and then he told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and the power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one joy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it.⁷³

Robert Chiltern further in the play declares that he never regretted that he was involved in corruption because "money gave me exactly what I wanted, power over others."⁷⁴ Concerning the importance of power, this character does not undergo any significant change during the story. It is obvious from the last act in which Lady Chiltern wants his husband to refuse the Cabinet seat. Lord Goring persuades her not to do so otherwise she will lose Sir Chiltern's love after all.

In the issue of politics, Robert Chiltern is a central figure of social criticism observation. With no doubt, unmasking social criticism is practiced in this case. Chiltern uncovers his opinions on what determined his action and behavior when he sold the state secret.

⁷³ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 33.

⁷⁴ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 35.

6 THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST ANALYSIS

It is argued that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has probably two subtexts: the homosexual subtext and the socialist one.⁷⁵ As the thesis deals with the analysis of given works with respect to social criticism, only the socialist subtext will be examined onwards.

Many critics explored that the play satirizes “every institution the British held sacred”⁷⁶, such as family, politics, work, education, marriage, religion, friendship, science and some others.⁷⁷ However, the thesis will focus on three major issues that are emphasized in the play in most radical way. Thus the issue of marriage, Victorian morality and class consciousness will be explored onwards.

6.1 Issue of Marriage

In this comedy, marriage becomes central subject of Wilde’s observation. He criticizes several factors that surrounded marriage in Victorian upper-class society. First, he finds it to be merely a matter of a business deal. In his eyes, marriage was seen to serve only as a mean of gaining social status, wealth and property.

Wilde undermines the pretence that marriage is guided by love and romance by mouth of Algernon Moncrieff who “call[s] that [marriage] business.”⁷⁸ He explains the difference between love and propose to marriage, when he says that “it is very romantic to be in love.”⁷⁹ Algernon advocates that “the excitement is all over”⁸⁰ after marriage proposal is done.

Oscar Wilde dealt with the issue of marriage not only in his comedies that take the form of satires. Furthermore, he also held forth on it in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891). Via this critical essay, Wilde pointed out that Victorian marriage “was as exercise in the mean-spirited preservation of private poverty, as well as manifestation of sexual repression and hypocritical continence.”⁸¹ He also founded marriage to be an institution in

⁷⁵ See Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, 10-12.

⁷⁶ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 110.

⁷⁷ See Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, 110.

⁷⁸ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 485.

⁷⁹ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 485.

⁸⁰ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 485.

⁸¹ Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, 11.

which it was impossible for individuals to flourish and that it “encouraged cheating and snuffed out sexual attraction between spouses.”⁸²

Considering *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is no explicit statement that would prove Wilde’s opinions on marriage. However, there are clear indications that unveil Wilde’s attitude to it pretty well. For instance, there is a dialogue between Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing in the first act in which these two characters argue about the necessary existence of Bunbury in a marriage:

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

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

ALGERNON: Then your wife will. You don’t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.⁸³

Wilde’s critical remarks about marriage are represented primarily by the character of Algernon who opens this issue at the very beginning of the first act. Here it is possible to notice the first stricture that is connected with marriage. In a dialogue between Algernon and his servant Lane in which a marriage is discussed, it comes out that Lane’s “views on marriage seem somewhat lax.” After they finish the discussion, Lane leaves and Algernon concludes by following: “Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.”⁸⁴ The purpose of this was not to insult lower classes. On the contrary, irony is used to evoke and prove a frivolous approach of aristocratic people not only to marriage but to moral principles at all.

At the same time, it is possible to assume that the character of Lane represents Wilde’s skeptical opinion of marriage. During a conversation that was dealt in the previous case, Lane expresses his unconcerned reservation of marriage, when he said to believe it to be “a very pleasant state” but immediately he continues with: “I have had very little experience

⁸² Kirk, *Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest*, 21.

⁸³ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 490.

⁸⁴ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 484.

of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.” Lane finds his marriage to be a mere “misunderstanding” and at the same time he adds that his family life is not an interesting topic and that: “I never think of it myself.”⁸⁵

Wilde also deals with the nature of marriage or in other words, with the freedom of choice who a girl will marry to. After Gwendolen accepts Jack’s proposal, announces it to her mother Lady Bracknell who immediately replies:

Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself . . .⁸⁶

As the Victorian marriage was obliged to secure a girl social status, comfort and other necessities, Lady Bracknell had to check Jack out because he is not on her “list of eligible young men.”⁸⁷ She has a pre-prepared “interview” for a contingent wooer to investigate various areas, as for instance about his character, income, property or his lineage. Wilde satirises this interrogation not only by Jack’s amusing answers but also by Lady Bracknell’s “serious” commentaries.

When one would think of theory of social criticism, this part of Wilde’s critical observation is reflected via unmasking social criticism. It is because Wilde uncovers real motives that lead a marriage, as it is obvious that the issue of wealth is hidden in this context.

⁸⁵ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 483.

⁸⁶ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 495.

⁸⁷ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest“, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 496.

6.2 Moral Principles

The second issue which will be handled in the context of *The Importance of Being Earnest* onwards is a question of moral principles of Victorian upper-class society. The play reflects Victorians' presumptions about moral principles. The characters of the plays deal with the questions what they should and should not do.

Within the play, morality in higher circles of London society is directly suppressed especially by two characters – Algernon and Jack. They both have what we can call a double life. Even though, each of them has their own reason for doing so, the core is perfectly identical. Algernon invented Bunbury, Jack created Ernest in order to provide them for keeping a mask of high-principled men on the one side and having a great fun deprived of moral principles on the other side.

In the following dialogue, Wilde openly expresses his opinion of “high” moral principles among Aristocrats. It is an extract from the first act of the play, in which Jack explains Algernon why he is Ernest in the town and Jack in the country. Here the decline of moral values is more than obvious:

JACK: . . . When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up town I have always pretended to have a younger brother Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes . . .⁸⁸

. . .

ALGERNON: 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 . . .⁸⁹

What is more, Algernon completely undermines the Victorian sense of morality by assuming that “in married life three is company and two is none.”⁹⁰ Here, it is obvious that Wilde corrupts the Victorian sense of morality hugely.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 488.

⁸⁹ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 489.

⁹⁰ Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 490.

⁹¹ See Van Kirk, *Wilde's Importance of Being Earnest*, 21.

Concerning the theory of social criticism in association with just analyzed issue of double-life, the method of principled social criticism is used here. Wilde reveals how Algernon and Jack actually believe moral principles, what they think of them and how they respect them. The fact of the matter is that Victorian moral principles and ethics in general are useless and even harmful as it has been already cited they can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness.

6.3 Social Consciousness

The importance of social consciousness within a life of an upper-class Victorian is noticed in the play quite openly. Here, this issue is examined predominantly in connection to marriage. As it has been already pursued several times, Victorian marriage was based on gaining social status, wealth and property.

Throughout the play, it is obvious that social status took primary importance among all the above mentioned values. It was highly required to married a person from outstanding social background that in addition possessed great fortune. The importance of social background is emphasized in the play via the character of Lady Bracknell predominantly. As Hitchens states in his study Lady Bracknell's "instinctive class consciousness makes her the arbiter of every scene."⁹²

The first mention concerning this issue appears in the first act. Here, Lady Bracknell inquires Jack about his property, income and also about his parents. However, just via this "interview" it is obvious, that money is still the most important aspect of marriage. When Lady Bracknell finds out that Jack is a waif, she strongly recommends him to "try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent"⁹³ to be suitable to marry her daughter Gwendolen. From this, we could find out that high social status is not so important.

In the context of social consciousness, it is also important to point out the issue of another Victorian value, namely earnestness. As the title of the plays denotes, being earnest was highly important in Victorian society. Earnestness, or "devotion to virtue and duty,"⁹⁴

⁹² Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, 12.

⁹³ Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest" in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 498.

⁹⁴ Van Kirk, *Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*, 20.

was a Victorian ideal. The connotative meaning of this notion Wilde used as a subject of social criticism. He made a pun of this ideal and created Earnest/Ernest. He mocks the ideals of earnestness as it is evident in the first act in his response when Jack confess that he is in fact called Ernest:

You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life.⁹⁵

In the context of social background, the issue of social roles is examined in the play too. Wilde denounces the concept of expected social roles. This is reflected in Lady Bracknell's speech when she insensitively counts against Mr. Bunbury:

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 absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others . . .⁹⁶

These words were certainly not expected to be said by a woman possessing the traditional female caring role.

⁹⁵ Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 487.

⁹⁶ Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, 492.

7 COMPARISON OF ANALYSED WORKS

The aim of this part of the thesis is to compare *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* with respect to major issues that are analysed as subjects of Wilde's critical remarks. Particular issues will be discussed in order to examine similarities and dissimilarities within them.

First, the issue of marriage is dealt in both works. In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde undermines Victorian perspective of marriage that he found to be based on unrealistic and excessive value of morality. On the other hand, *The Importance of Being Earnest* observes the issue of marriage from a quite different point of view. Here, a marriage is criticized for being a matter of business transaction only. In connection to this subject, the nature of marriage is then discussed and mutual relationship of spouses considered.

With no doubt, the issue of marriage represent fundamental topic in both plays. Even though Wilde examines various features of it, we could assume that they all lead to the identical goal. And this is the undermining Victorian upper-class society, its values and prejudices. From both works, we can feel Wilde's sceptical opinion of marriage.

Furthermore, Wilde observed moral principles and presumptions about them. In *An Ideal Husband*, Robert Chiltern's moral awareness is judged in the context of political affair. He sold a state secret in the past and thanks to this he became rich, influential and above all a recognize politician. Moral principles, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are studied predominantly at the characters of Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing. This play display immorality of these two men through their double-life images.

As we can notice, the issue of morality is solved from slightly different point of view in each work. However, it is possible to discover what Wilde pointed out. On the basis of the two plays, he revealed that there is an encounter of private and public morality in Victorian lives. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that Victorian Aristocrats are a society of poses. That Victorians are hypocritical "puppets" of Victorian social conventions whose the only concern is to be seen as a pure member of highly valued society.

Another issue that can be compared refers to aesthetic principles that are performed in both works. It has been solved earlier in the thesis that aestheticism is expressed via two dandies, Lord Goring and Algernon Moncrieff. Therefore, we can assume that aestheticism is displayed in the identical way in both works.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this bachelor thesis was to identify and analyse subject matters of Oscar Wilde's social criticism in two of his comedies *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both plays were examined with respect to major issues which became central to critical remarks of Oscar Wilde.

Thus, the issue of marriage, moral hypocrisy and the issue of politics were explored in *An Ideal Husband*. These three subjects were found to be crucial elements in this work. Similarly, the second play on which the thesis was based, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, revealed the issue of marriage, moral hypocrisy and the question of social consciousness. As the thesis was written, there was an effort to prove scrutinising issues by appropriate excerpts from the plays themselves. On the other side, the secondary literature sources were used as well.

The thesis comes to the conclusion that Oscar Wilde found his social criticism in the given works upon almost identical issues. Although, naturally, there are some differences in contents of particular subjects, we can assume that Wilde was driven by identical thoughts throughout the plays. Thus, he undermined Victorian values, behaviour and manners by satirising them as well as he mocked of the upper-class Victorian society itself.

As it was mentioned many times, the thesis concerns fundamental issues of Wilde's critical remarks. Naturally, the whole concept of his criticism is much broader. Wilde also deals with issues such religion, education system and others. However, these are included to smaller extent. So, the further research in the sphere of social criticism may be accomplished.

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