

SOCIAL SATIRE AND SUPERFICIALITY OF SOCIETY IN THE PLAYS OF OSCAR WILDE

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Abstract: *This paper examines the incisive social satire present in Oscar Wilde's plays, arguing that he masterfully employs wit, irony, and paradox to expose the hypocrisy and superficiality of Victorian society, particularly its upper classes. Through an analysis of key works such as "The Importance of Being Earnest", "Lady Windermere's Fan", "A Woman of No Importance" and "Ideal Husband", the paper reveals how Wilde uses characterization, plot, and language to lampoon the obsession with appearances, the tyranny of social conventions, and the shallowness of relationships within a society obsessed with status and conformity. The paper concludes by highlighting how Wilde's satirical critique, while rooted in his own era, resonates with contemporary audiences as it speaks to enduring themes of human nature and the often-deceptive nature of social facades.*

Key words: *Satire, beliefs, paradoxical statement, obsession.*

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde's plays frequently delve into the realm of social satire and the superficiality that permeates society, employing a satirical and comedic approach. He skilfully employs wit, irony, and clever dialogue to scrutinize the shallowness and hypocrisy prevalent among the upper class and the societal norms of his era.

In his renowned work, "The Importance of Being Earnest," Wilde masterfully satirizes the superficiality of the upper class by deriding their preoccupation with trivial matters such as social status, fashion, and etiquette. The characters in the play often prioritize appearances and social conventions over genuine emotions or moral values. Through the character of Lady Bracknell, Wilde ridicules the upper class's absurd fixation on lineage and wealth, effectively highlighting the ludicrous nature of their priorities.

Likewise, in "An Ideal Husband," Wilde delves into the facade of respectability and the underlying corruption that lurks beneath it. The characters in the play are depicted as more concerned with upholding a flawless public image than leading morally upright lives. Wilde employs this portrayal to condemn the hypocrisy and shallowness prevalent in the society of his time.

“Wilde's plays employ humour and satire as powerful tools to expose the superficiality and moral bankruptcy of the society in which he resided. Through his

sharp wit and clever dialogue, he challenges societal norms and compels his audience to confront the absurdity of their own values and beliefs.”

In his plays, the renowned playwright Oscar Wilde skilfully incorporates social satire and critiques the superficiality of society. He accomplishes this by exposing the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent in Victorian society, where outward appearances hold utmost importance and moral principles are often contradicted by individuals' actions.

For instance, characters like Lady Windermere in "Lady Windermere's Fan" are fixated on upholding a facade of respectability, yet they engage in secret affairs and deceit. This stark contrast between the external image projected and the internal reality serves to underscore the shallowness of Victorian morality.

Additionally, Wilde satirizes the relentless pursuit of reputation, emphasizing how individuals prioritize social status over genuine values. A prime example of this can be seen in Lady Bracknell from "The Importance of Being Earnest," who places an excessive emphasis on maintaining a "good name," even at the expense of her daughter's happiness.

The elite class depicted in Wilde's works is fixated on image, style, and societal customs. This emphasis on outward appearances rather than authentic substance is a prevalent motif. Figures such as Lord Darlington in "Lady Windermere's Fan" are consumed with upholding their social standing, participating in superficial dialogues and trivial activities.

Lack of Intellectual Depth which Wilde frequently illustrates the upper class as intellectually shallow and lacking in genuine profundity. Characters like Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen in "The Importance of Being Earnest" prioritize social etiquette and clever banter over engaging in substantial discussions or delving into profound concepts.

The significance of "The Importance of Being Earnest" is evident in the title itself, which serves as a satire on the fixation with outward appearances and names. Through characters like Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who create alter egos to evade societal expectations and pursue their desires, Wilde showcases how individuals often prioritize how they are perceived over their authentic selves.

In "The Importance of Being Earnest," Wilde employs clever dialogue and absurd scenarios to highlight the irrationality of Victorian social norms. The characters' incessant focus on trivial matters, their obsession with upholding facades, and their preference for social conventions over genuine emotions all serve to underscore the superficiality of the society in which they exist.

Wilde employs a range of satirical techniques in his works, including wit, irony, and paradoxical statements, to effectively unveil the contradictions and hypocrisy prevalent in Victorian society. Through the use of witty repartee, his characters skilfully highlight the absurdity of social norms and the superficiality of the values held by the society. Furthermore, Wilde employs exaggeration and caricature to accentuate the flaws and

follies of the upper class, with characters such as Lady Bracknell portrayed as exaggerated figures whose obsession with social status and appearances reaches ludicrous levels. By crafting situations that challenge societal conventions and exposing the hypocrisy of those who adhere to them, Wilde effectively undermines the very foundations of Victorian society, compelling audiences to critically examine the values that govern their lives.

“Wilde's social satire is a potent form of criticism that effectively targets the Victorian era. Through his plays, he unveils the hypocrisy, shallowness, and irrationality prevalent in the society of his time. This prompts audiences to critically examine the social norms and conventions they have unquestioningly accepted.”

Furthermore, Wilde's themes of social satire and the superficiality of society possess a timeless relevance that transcends both time and cultural boundaries. They strike a chord with the universal human experience, resonating with individuals across different eras and societies. The preoccupation with appearances, the relentless pursuit of social status, and the inherent contradictions within societal norms are enduring issues that continue to be explored and challenged in contemporary art and culture.

Wilde's skilful use of wit and satire serves as a reminder of the immense power of humour in social critique. By exposing the hypocrisy and shallowness of society, his plays compel audiences to reevaluate the values that govern their lives and aspire to a more profound and purposeful existence. His sharp wit and perceptive observations ensure that his work remains relevant and captivating for generations to come.

Wilde's "An Ideal Husband" showcases his exceptional talent in dissecting the superficial aspects of Victorian society while delving into themes of morality, honour, and forgiveness. The play, set in London's high society, takes readers on a captivating journey through the characters' lives, providing profound insights into human nature and the complexities of moral decision-making. This essay will explore the nuances of "An Ideal Husband" and analyse how Wilde utilizes his characters and their interactions to critique the prevailing moral norms and values of his era.

The narrative of "An Ideal Husband" centres around Sir Robert Chiltern, a respected politician, and his devoted wife, Lady Gertrude Chiltern. Sir Robert is portrayed as a paragon of moral virtue, highly esteemed in society for his unwavering integrity. However, Wilde exposes the fragility of this facade when the enigmatic Mrs. Cheveley enters the picture. Mrs. Cheveley, armed with a dark secret from Sir Robert's past, coerces him into endorsing a deceitful scheme in the House of Commons. This revelation lays bare Sir Robert's previous moral transgressions and prompts a reevaluation of his supposed righteousness.

Wilde's portrayal of Sir Robert Chiltern serves as a scathing critique of the hypocrisy prevalent in Victorian society. The playwright challenges the notion of an "ideal husband" or a paragon of virtue, exposing the illusion of moral perfection that is often projected by individuals. By revealing Sir Robert's hidden flaws, Wilde highlights

the inherent imperfections that lie beneath the virtuous facade maintained by many in high society. Through this character, Wilde urges readers to contemplate the unrealistic expectations placed upon individuals to uphold an image of moral perfection.

Additionally, the character of Lord Goring, a close friend of Sir Robert, offers a contrasting perspective on morality. Unlike the seemingly honourable Sir Robert, Lord Goring is renowned for his wit, charm, and laid-back demeanour. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Lord Goring possesses a deeper sense of integrity and self-awareness. He openly acknowledges his own imperfections, embracing them without pretence. Wilde employs Lord Goring as a means to question the rigid moral standards imposed by society, suggesting that true virtue lies in self-awareness and the acceptance of one's humanity.

Mrs. Cheveley, another significant character in the play, embodies the manipulative and cunning aspects of human nature. She symbolizes the relentless pursuit of self-interest, regardless of the harm it may cause to others. "By portraying greed and ambition through Mrs. Cheveley, Wilde creates a contrast to the supposedly virtuous characters in the play. This serves to highlight the dangers of prioritizing personal gain over moral values, shedding light on the corrupting influence of wealth and power."

In addition to exploring the theme of greed, Wilde also delves into the institution of marriage in the play. The relationship between Sir Robert and Lady Gertrude Chiltern is subjected to intense scrutiny as Sir Robert's past is revealed, threatening to unravel their seemingly perfect union. Initially, Lady Gertrude idolizes her husband, seeing him as the epitome of virtue. However, the play challenges the conventional notion of an "ideal husband" by exposing the complexities of human nature and the potential for moral ambiguity in every individual.

Ultimately, the play's resolution centres on themes of forgiveness and redemption. Sir Robert's decision to confront his past and seek forgiveness from his loved ones conveys a profound message of personal growth and transformation. Wilde utilizes this narrative element to underscore the significance of acknowledging one's mistakes and taking accountability for one's actions. He posits that genuine morality is not rooted in a flawless past, but rather in the ability to learn from one's missteps and strive for self-improvement.

Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband" is a remarkable piece of literature that explores the complexities of human ethics and the artificial constructs of society. Through his adept character development and clever wit, Wilde critiques the shallow values of Victorian upper-class society and challenges the traditional ideals of an "ideal husband." The play serves as a timeless reminder that true virtue is not superficial, but rather lies in self-awareness, empathy, and forgiveness, which are integral to our humanity. Wilde's enduring masterpiece continues to engage readers, prompting them to question societal

norms and delve into the intricacies of human nature in their quest for a deeper understanding of morality.

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde's plays, while entertaining and witty on the surface, are deeply subversive critiques of Victorian society. He uses humor and satire not merely to expose the flaws of the upper class, but to challenge the very foundations of a system built on appearances, conformity, and the suppression of genuine human connection. Wilde's characters, obsessed with social climbing, superficial relationships, and the maintenance of an impeccable public image, demonstrate the hollowness of a society that prioritizes outward appearances over inner substance. His witty dialogue and clever plot twists expose the contradictions inherent in Victorian morality, revealing the hypocrisy that underpins its social fabric. While Wilde's plays are firmly rooted in his own historical context, their themes of superficiality, social manipulation, and the pursuit of empty pleasures continue to resonate today. In a world where social media and curated online personas are increasingly prevalent, Wilde's satirical vision of a society fixated on appearances feels eerily prescient.

Ultimately, Wilde's plays serve as a mirror to the human condition, reminding us that true worth and happiness are not found in external validation or social status, but in authenticity, genuine connection, and a willingness to challenge the superficiality that often defines our interactions. His enduring legacy lies not only in his masterful use of language and humor, but also in his capacity to spark critical reflection and encourage us to question the masks we wear and the societal structures that often limit our potential for authentic self-expression.

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