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SATIRE AND SOCIAL VISION IN OSCAR WILDE'S DRAMA

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Introduction

Satire has always been present in the English literary arena and has gradually evolved from the sharp, often cynical attacks on vice in Jacobean drama to the more integrated and nuanced social criticism in Victorian novels. While it emphasises various themes, romantic poetry also incorporated satire, often with a more personal and ironic flavour. Each era turned to satire in ways that addressed its own social, political, and literary interests. From the Jacobean era to the Victorian age, satire in English literature has experienced notable changes that reflect each period's particular society issues and literary sensibilities.

The Jacobean drama experienced the rise of a darker and more cynical tone than the Elizabethan. Satire became a major weapon for social and political criticism under King Jame's reign. Ben Jonson's satirical drama *Volpone* (1606) for example uses sharp wit and sarcastic humour to highlight the prevalent moral depravity and financial avarice of his time through his characters.The playwright offers a critical commentary on the materialistic values of the time by satirising the avarice of his characters who are always ready to exploit and deceive for personal gain.

During the Romantic period, satire found its way in timeless poetic works by the second generation of Romanticists. The epic poems by Lord Byron, especially "Don Juan" (1819–1824), abound with a wide spectrum of satire that gently derides social conventions, hypocrisy, showy and gaudy artistic norms. Byron's satire criticises various facets of European life, including the nobility, war, and Romantic ideals, through wit and sarcastic commentary.

Prominent novels written throughout the Victorian era also served as potent instruments for social commentary and satire. Though not a direct satire in the line of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) or Lord Byron's "Don Juan", George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), for instance, uses a lighter and sophisticated form of social satire. In this novel, Eliot critically examines the provençal society of Middlemarch, exposes the limitations, the hypocrisy, and self-deceptions of its inhabitants. In George Eliot's work, indeed, satire is often embedded in deep

psychological insights and empathetic portrayal of characters, which allows the writer to debunk in a subtle way such institutions as marriage, the medical profession, and the narrow-mindedness of provençal people.

Rigidity as well as demanding social conventions, decorum and morals were distinctive features in the Victorian era. As an eye-witness of late Victorian society, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde[1] (1854-1900), is among the artists whose works posit the need for social change. His poetry, plays and short stories, persistently display his artistic vision for social change through a carefully crafted philosophy which mildly questioned the validity of the straight-jacketing conventional morals of his time. More significantly, his bid to transform his society culminated in his drama, which was possibly the most popular and accessible genre.

Wilde's plays contrive a social vision by confronting the Victorians with satiric comedy of manners. And in so doing, the playwright gives his counterparts a glimpse of their own vices, while suggesting means by which such social flaws can be amended. Arguably, the type of society Oscar Wilde portrays in the plays studied can be labelled as a society of moral paradox, "a society where maintaining appearance was paramount … [a society] which deeply craved moral guidance" (Pilarczyk, 1997: 27), [2]. Therefore, no other means than satire in the Elliottian sense could have served best the purpose of the dramatist. Satire, as Robert C. Elliott defines it, is an

> artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.[3]

Elliott's definition perfectly features such plays as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1907), *An Ideal Husband* (1912), *A Woman of no Importance* (1916) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1917), whereby Wilde's social vision and engagement become apparent. Remarkably, the four selected plays share a central unifying characteristic: the caricature of a complex and sophisticated code of behaviour holding sway in fashionable circles of the aristocratic society. In each of these plays, appearances take precedence over true moral character. Moreover, the

[1] Referred to as Oscar Wilde in my analysis.

[2] Ian C. Pilarczyk."The Terrible Haystack Murder: The Moral Paradox of Hypocrisy, Prudery and Piety in Antebellum America". *The American Journal of Legal History*, Vol. 41, No.1 (Jan., 1997), pp.25-60

[3] Elliott, Robert C.. "Satire". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 7 Feb. 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/satire. Accessed 21 September 2021.

plays are licked into shape by plots that revolve around intrigues of carnality, that is, lust and greed, self-interested cynicism, licentiousness, moral paradox and hypocrisy among the elite circles of the "idle rich", which the dramatist ironically accesses through his artistic achievement and self-fashioned social persona.

Predicated by Oscar Wilde's dramatic works, this paper reveals how the four plays under scrutiny indict the British upper class people's inconsistent social and moral flaws including idleness, class-consciousness, hypocrisy, cant and unfaithful marital relationships. The essay is subdivided into four sections. The first one shows how Wilde's drama reflects the upper class people's classist attitude. The second section attends to the characters' idleness. Section three examines how these comedies illustrate of the upper class people's hypocritical manners, and the last section dwells on the issue of profligacy among the aristocracy.

I- Class-consciousness in Oscar Wilde's Drama

Oscar Wilde's drama is deeply rooted in the English classist attitude. In *An Ideal Husband*, for instance, when Mrs. Cheveley tries to blackmail Sir Robert to support the Argentine scheme, the latter indignantly replies:

> If you will allow me, I will call your carriage for you. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs. Cheveley, that you seem to be unable to realise that you are talking to an English gentleman (Wilde,1912 :18).

Sir Robert knows that his reputation is at stake, because Mrs. Cheveley is likely to reveal the secrets of his fortune and his brilliant career. Actually, Robert has built his wealth and fame by selling classified state secrets. Mrs. Cheveley does have a copy of that secret-related letter which she uses to blackmail him. And she knows that, with such a comprising file at her disposal, she can trick Sir Robert into any shady deal by threatening to get it published in the newspapers if he refuses to 'play the game'. However, though he bargains in a position of weakness, Sir Robert keeps on arrogantly humming that he is an 'English gentleman'. Accordingly, he demands a special treatment with due respect and honour. Such attitude shows how he believes in his own natural status as a man of high birth endowed with the power to have others behave as he wants.

Similar attitude echoes in *A Woman of No Importance* as much as in *An Ideal Husband*. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth, a man so full of himself, in his attempt to reconnect with his disowned illegitimate son Gerald, makes the latter believe that the secretary

position he is offered is an act of benevolence from a man of high birth. And the effects of Illingworth's patronising attitude of superiority is reflected in Gerald's self-belittling conviction that, as a person of low birth, he barely deserves that position. Gerald's statement while trying to urge his mother, Mrs. Arbuthnot, to approve of Lord Illingworth's offer testifies of Wilde's engagement with class-consciousness and its implications in his plays.

> He knows more about my life than any one I have ever met. I feel an awful duffer when I am with […] Lord Illingworth. Of course, I have had so few advantages. I have not been to Eton or Oxford like other chaps. But Lord Illingworth doesn't seem to mind that. He has been awfully good to me, mother. Gerald says (Wilde, 1916: 45).

By making such an assertion, Gerald not only intends to express his happiness, but also invites his mother to the celebration of this happiness. The reason for this happiness is that Gerald has been offered a position which he believes he does not deserve, because he has not attended prestigious universities such as Eton or Oxford. Implicitly he implies that in Britain, lower class children cannot have access to these institutions, which are reserved to highly-born children. Therefore, Gerald's insisting on the importance of "being to Eton or Oxford" hints at and gives insight into the British educational system governed by the British classist ideology.

Furthermore, British aristocrats do not deem it honourable to mismatch with women of the lower class. The relation between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot is a case in point. Illingworth is a man of the upper class while Mrs Arbuthnot is a poor woman hailing from the lower class and a girlfriend to Lord Illingworth. When she gets pregnant, Lord Illingworth abandons her, because it is a disgrace and dishonour for a man of his class to marry a woman of such a low birth.

Lenka Drbalová is right when he contends that Wilde's drama deals with "the idea of morals, manners, and social behaviour (36)." However, Wilde's plays are not content with a mere description. They not only engage in a satirical description of British classist practices, but also display a strong commitment to turn the Wildean fictitious British society into a better place to live in. His plays are oriented toward the retribution of upper-class characters with inappropriate attitudes. An example of this punitive treatment occurs with Mrs. Cheveley's blackmailing of Sir Robert in *An Ideal Husband*. Sir Robert escapes from the shame that Mrs Cheveley is about to inflict on him for his past illicit acts. Nevertheless, the ephemeral but very shocking distress he witnesses as a result of this blackmail teaches a very good lesson that

Wilde's play gives to British aristocracy. This scene in the play reads as an episode that urges the British society to transcend its classist ideology.

Class-consciousness in Wilde's plays functions as a dramatic tool allowing the playwright to expose the arbitrariness and artificiality of some social norms and rules through double-life protagonists. Sir Robert's arrogant attitude towards Mrs. Cheveley, and Lord Illingworth's refusal to marry with Mrs. Arbuthnot because of her low social status illustrate that British upper class people's self-consciousness practices the author addresses alongside idleness in the plays studied.

II- Idleness and British Aristocracy

In each of the selected plays, the well-born are never busy with anything better than dating women, or smoking, or having a party, if they are not engaged in illicit actions, unlawful gatherings, or any indecent exposure. Miss Hester's description of Henry Weston in *A Woman of No Importance* not only illustrates that poor perception of the man of noble birth, but also points out the ruinous effects of his dandy-like behaviour on women who fall prey to his temptations.

> Lord Henry Weston! I remember him, Lady Hunstanton. A man with a hideous smile and a hideous past. He is asked everywhere. No dinner-party is complete without him. What of those whose ruin is due to him? They are nameless. If you met them in the street, you would turn your head away. (Wilde, 1916: 37).

In other words, Lord Weston never misses a party, and his daily activity revolves round attending parties, drinking, eating and dancing. Thus, he has no time for any productive work. Such a picture might be exaggerated in Wilde's play, but it is quite pertinent to the British upper class people's lifestyle. They are usually landlords who eke out a living on their lands, on the labour of working class. Miss Hester's comments on Henry Weston's behaviour reflect what Bertrand Russell calls "aristocratic idleness" in his essay *In Praise of Idleness* (1932). Through the ambivalent concept indeed, Russell describes a state of leisure enjoyed by the upper classes thanks to their wealth ironically created by the labour of the poor.

The issue of idleness is also pervasive in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The whole story in this play hinges upon Lady Windermere's birthday party. It opens, progresses, and ends with leisure events. That partying event being held by a high born couple is very significant in so far as it highlights the upper class people's strong drive for parties and hatred for work. Also, the social status of the attendees of this party is illustrative of the idleness of the British aristocracy. As the Windermere's butler, Parker, points it out, a good deal of the guests belongs to the gentry,

including Lady Stutfield, Sir James Royston, Lord and Lady Paisley, Lord Darlington, and Lord Augustus Lorton. Yet, none of these ladies and gentlemen show any interest in worthy undertaking. Instead, they are interested in idle hedonistic leisure and pleasure, a privilege fostered by unfair social systems that allow a few to be idle while the underprivileged majority have to work.

Lady Windermere's Fan, *A Woman of no Importance*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* allude to the laziness of the English aristocracy. By way of an illustration, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon notes that "the English young people do nothing else than going to the Theatre, the Empire or to the club" (Wilde, 1907: 34). This statement underscores the late Victorian English youth's trend of life. Admittedly, no distinction is made as far as the lower and the middle class young people are concerned. However, considering the poor living conditions of the latter, it turns out that the youth that Algernon refers to, are those of high birth. In the same line of ideas, in *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring appears as an excellent idle dandy. The conversation between Lord Caversham, Lady Chiltern and Mabel Chiltern highlights Lord Goring's idle life and his dandy-like character. That description of Goring raises serious concerns for Lord Caversham:

> **Lord Caversham.** Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?
> **Lady Chiltern.** [*Smiling*.] I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.
> **Lord Caversham.** Because he leads such an idle life.
> **Mabel Chiltern.** Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season". You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?
> **Lord Caversham.** [*Looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes*.] You are a very charming young lady! (Wilde, 1912: 2-3).

Mabel Chiltern who is in love with Lord Goring tries to redeem him by proving that Goring is not a lazy man as his father Lord Caversham thinks he is. The reasons that Mabel Chiltern puts forward to explain away Lord Caversham's opinion about Lord Goring as an idle man are likely ridiculous. Her arguments sound rather ironic as they point to the exact opposite of Lord Goring's lazy habits. Mistaking "aristocratic idleness" in the Russellian sense of leisurely life for work is characteristic of Oscar Wilde's drama. Then, the playwright uses irony here to satirise the British aristocracy's idleness. From Mabel's statement it can be inferred that just like Lord Goring, she is unable to make the difference between idleness and industriousness. In other words, what the English upper class people call hard work does not mean being always busy in the office. Their so-called hard work rather boils down to going to the Opera three times a week, dressing up with extreme care, and dining out every day.

Thus, the four selected plays denounce English upper class laziness, or at least, draw attention to the follies of the upper society. These plays portray the aristocrats' obsession with parties, their keen interest in sartorial matters such as the choice of their garments, and being finicky over trivialities. Moreover, through aristocratic personae "saying one thing and doing another" (Barden, Rucker, and Petty, 2005), or "publicly upholding moral norms, especially for others to follow, but personally violating them in private" (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010), Wilde sheds light on hypocrisy as a social flaw among the English upper class.

III. Wilde's Drama and the Upper Class Hypocrisy

In an attempt to account for the Victorian frame of mind, Walter E. Houghton (1957) outlines a set of social weaknesses overtly conflicting with the Victorian morality and code of conduct. Those flaws include strong faith in material progress, the insincerities of conformity, moral pretension and hypocrisy. Victorian contemporary thinkers, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Mathew Arnold, John Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few, perceive those flaws as a serious threat to the foundation of their society whose motto is the "cult of sincerity" (424). Joel Hawes expresses the same concerns in his 'lectures to young men' when he warns the latter against moral degeneracy and utterly regrets the moral duplicity of his contemporaries.

> Instead of acting in the open daylight, [he says] pursuing the direct and straight-forward path of rectitude and duty, you see men, extensively, putting on false appearances; working in the dark, and carrying out their plans by stratagem and deceit. Nothing open, nothing direct and honest; one thing is said, and another thing meant. When you look for a man in one place, you find him in another. In flattering lips and a double heart do they speak. Their language and conduct do not proceed from fixed principle and open hearted sincerity; but from a spirit of duplicity. (Hawes, 1828: 76)

Hawes's dismay at such tendencies to conceal inner vileness in outward respectable appearances is dramatised in Wilde's plays, which satirise the ethical misconduct and idleness of the English upper class, and indict the cant of this social class.

The critical stance about such empty and artificial pursuits in Oscar Wilde's plays takes the form of satirical dramatization of the upper-class society in which higher birth dandy-like characters claim to live up to the social ideals. But, the behaviors of these people deliberately betray the ideals whenever they are outside of their community. Their intention is to escape

censorship. The portrayal of Lord Goring's deceitful behaviour in *An Ideal Husband* testifies to his lack of ethical standards.

Lord Goring is the unique and best friend of Sir Robert Chiltern and Lady Chiltern. Yet, when Lady Chiltern sends him a romantic letter in which she expresses her intention to break up with her husband, he mischievously tries to seize the opportunity to cheat on Sir Robert despite their long-standing friendship. Goring's ill-intention is revealed through the instructions he gives to Phipps.

> Phipps, [he says], there is a lady coming to see me this evening on particular business. Show her into the drawing-room when she arrives. You understand? (…) No one else is to be admitted, under any circumstances. (Wilde, 1912: 72).

Throughout the play, Lord Goring always poses as a respectable and honourable gentleman. Actually, his pretentious claim stems from the *de facto* link with Victorians established between his aristocratic social status and his social ideal and entitlements. Commenting upon the pervasiveness of this perception in Victorian works, Robin Gilmour rightly notes that :

> the idea of the gentleman is manifestly important in the Victorian novel; one cannot read very far in Thackeray, Dickens, or Trollope, without realising that they were fascinated by the image of the gentleman and its relation to the actual and ideal possibilities for the moral life in society. (2)

However, though he is a gentleman by birth, Lord Goring, does not embody any of the 'ideal possibilities for the moral life in society' Gilmour points out. His lascivious behaviour exemplified by his deliberate misinterpretation of the Lady Chiltern's solace-seeking letter proves that he has no sense of gentlemanhood. Indeed, following a squabble with her husband, Lady Chiltern wants her friend Lord Goring to advise her on how to settle the issue. Therefore, in the conclusion of her letter to him she writes: "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude" (Wilde, 1912: 68). Instead of taking it for a token of confidence on him, due to their close friendship, Lord Goring rather takes it for an invitation to start a love affair with her. Far from his claimed lordly respectable and honourable character, Goring's insidious misinterpretation of the letter clearly reveals his real identity as a loose and carefree womaniser.

In the same satirical spectrum, the real identity of Sir Robert, who is reputed to be a respectable and wealthy man in his community, is revealed. This revelation is expressed when he talks with Mrs. Cheveley:

> **Mrs. Cheveley**. [Rising and facing him.] I mean that I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too.
> **Sir Robert Chiltern.** What letter?
> **Mrs. Cheveley**. [Contemptuously.] The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley's secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares – a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase. (Wilde, 1912: 25).

In the above dialogue, Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Sir Robert through a letter he wrote about twenty years ago and which paved the way to his current social position as a wealthy and respectable gentleman. Mrs. Cheveley shows that Sir Robert pretends to be a respectable and honourable man for many years, while in reality he is a disgraced, disloyal, and dishonest man.

Thus, the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* lays greater emphasis on hypocrisy, especially through the characters of Jack and Algernon. Jack has two different names. In the countryside, he is known as John Worthing, while he is called Mr. Earnest in London. He takes such a name because he wants to marry Mrs. Gwendolen Fairfax. Likewise, Mr. Algernon also introduces himself to Cecily as Mr. Earnest. The two men pretend to be respectable gentlemen in their own families. Jack is well respected in his own family, particularly by his helper Cecily who calls him Uncle Jack. Mr. Algernon also poses as a well-bred man who embodies the values of respect and honour in the eyes of his family especially Lady Bracknell, and Mrs. Gwendolen Fairfax. Yet, these identities are mere masks. The truth about these identities are revealed as early as in Act II where it is mentioned that Jack's so-called brother Mr. Earnest has never existed and that Algernon has never had a brother called Mr Bumbury. Moreover, when Jack judges Algernon's love affair with his ward Cecily as something morally insane, and when he insists on his return to London, Algernon replies that "[his] duty as a gentleman has never interfered with [his] pleasures in the smallest degree" (Wilde,1912: 50). Through the statement, Algernon admits that he has two different personalities: a gentleman, which is the identity he plainly displays to everyone, and a masked identity of a licentious hedonist.

Similarly, Duchess of Derwick's treatment of Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is much revealing of the cant of the English high class people. When she first enters Lady Windermere's house with her daughter Agatha, she joyfully introduces the latter to Lady Windermere. Meanwhile, Duchess of Derwick objects introducing her to Lord Darlington she regards as a rakish-type of gentleman, a "far too wicked" philanderer. As a mother, Duchess intends to preserve her daughter against him. Hence her searing caution: "Agatha, this is Lord Darlington. Mind you don't believe a word he says" (Wilde 1912: 9). Lord Darlington is a man

of high birth, but behind this status, a wicked personality is hidden. He is well-known as a morally corrupt and disreputable person.

Considering the misconduct of these titled characters in *An Ideal Husband, The importance of Being Earnest,* and *Lady Windermere's Fan,* it can be reasonably asserted that Oscar Wilde's plays are illustrative of the hypocritical manners of the English upper class. In this respect, Lenka Drbalová observes that Wilde's drama deals with the hypocrisy of the upper class, their "feigned morality" and "pretended manners" (36). However, the protagonists' hypocritical behaviour in the plays is solely motivated by their desire to cheat, while they preserve the honours and privileges tied to their noble status. Wilde's plays also poke fun at the weight of Victorian society's unrealistic expectations of the individual, which ultimately results to deceitful engagement in a double life.

IV . Sexual Profligacy among the Upper Class

In a quite different context, Ian C. Pilarczyk analyses moral duplicity and profligacy, or extravagance through the Dickensian character of Mr. Picsniff and concludes that the protagonist embodies and displays the worst features of the Victorian age. For Pilarczyk, Mr. Picsniff epitomises "the way in which Victorians claim to be pious when they were not, professing sexual purity – which most strikingly in the case of men – was but a façade"(35). To this description of the Dickensian protagonist, Pilarczyk adds the moral paradox in the Victorian society, by insisting on the hypocritical exemplification of such moral values as prudery and piety.

In the three selected plays *An Ideal Husband, A Woman of no Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the English nobility's irresponsible attitude to sexuality emerges as an important subject matter.

In An Ideal Husband , Mabel Chiltern alludes to that promiscuous life when she complains about Tommy Strafford who indecently and obstinately wants to have sex with her.

> Well, Tommy has proposed to me again. Tommy does nothing but propose to me. He proposed to me last night in the music-room, when I was quite unprotected […] Then he proposed to me in broad daylight this morning, in front of that dreadful statue of Achilles. (Wilde, 1912: 45)

Not only does Tommy's relentless proposal to Mabel sound indecent but it points to the sexual harassment the young lady suffers from a gentleman her own father, Sir Robert Chiltern,

considers “the best secretary he has ever had” (Wilde, 1912: 45). The high esteem Sir Chiltern has of his subordinate is at odd with the latter’s irresponsible sexuality. Arguably, Tommy is a man whose outlook commands respect. Paradoxically, his behaviour fails to resonate with his claimed identity.

As Mabel Chiltern points it out, such irresponsibility is true to Lord Goring as well. When the latter tells Mabel Chiltern that he loves her, she replies: “I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before. I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities” (Wilde, 1912: 97). Lord Goring, as his name indicates it, is a titled man and who, as Tornaritis observes, “always dress[es] in the most up to date fashion, and demonstrates substantial intelligence and a penchant for acute analysis of human behaviour”(Wilde, 1912: 97). Lord Goring is supposed to be a gentleman, but he lacks the moral quality, which John Ruskin terms as “the essence of gentleman.”[4] Instead, he is a narcissistic self-centred character with shallow moral. By presenting high-social status men who are always inclined to womanize girls, Wilde’s plays highlight the frivolous attitude of the English upper class people.

In *A Woman of no Importance*, Lady Caroline suggests that all the bachelors “should be married off in a week to some plain respectable girl, in order to teach them not to meddle with other people’s property” (Wilde, 1916: 23). Caroline’s suggestion infers that unmarried men are likely to indulge in illicit love affairs with married women. Yet, as the conversation proceeds on, Lady Hunstanton says: “I am told that, nowadays, all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men” (Wilde, 1893: 23). That statement provides insight into the pervasiveness of profligate lifestyle of the people of her community. For Oscar Wilde, profligacy is a pervasive moral and social plague, which even the rigid Victorian wedlock norms have failed to deal with. Knowing that the play *A Woman of no Importance* is set in a stern Victorian context, Lady Hunstanton’s statement may be exaggerated. However, resorting to exaggeration is purposely intended in Wilde’s writing that aims to satirise the English nobility that pretends to be the upholders of high moral virtues, while it secretly engages in disgraceful love affairs.

Similar scenes about sexual profligacy occur in *Lady Windermere’s Fan.* During Lady Windermere’s birthday party, the Duchess of Derwick informs her husband that Lord Windermere, whom they all consider as ‘an ideal husband’ visits Mrs. Erlynn “**four** and **five**

[4] For John Ruskin, the "essence of a gentleman" is characterised by a keen sense of moral obligation, natural beauty and connection, and inherent virtue. As such a true gentleman, he believes, should be sensitive to the needs of others, should have a natural respect for his surroundings, and should refrain from unwholesome behaviour.

times a week" (Wilde, 1917: 11). Actually, despite his high social status and position both as a lord and a respectable husband, Lord Windermere is unable to abide by the moral standards of his social class. His licentiousness is pointed out by the Duchess when she insists that in a single week, he goes to Curzon Street four and five times. Lord Windermere has only three or two days to spend with his own wife, Lady Windermere. Unfaithfulness extends to Lord Darlington, who is also a man of high birth. When Lady Windermere has decided to divorce with Lord Windermere, Lord Darlington, instead of seeking to reconcile them, tries to elope with her to London. Neither his title nor his friendship with Lord Darlington deters his love for Lady Windermere and his move to take her as his own lover.

Of all the four selected plays, it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* that brings best the issue of unfaithfulness into salience. Mr. John Worthing's travels to London are motivated by his desire to satisfy his sexual desires, which he finds unbecoming in his own area where he is reputed as a respectable, honest, and loyal man. Algernon also goes to the countryside where he pretends he has a brother who is very sick, and needs his visit. Yet, the reason for such a visit is rather his desire to have a love affair with Cecily, Jack's ward. Neither Jack nor Algernon are wedded, and as a follow up, this long and strenuous journey to have illicit love affair dents his image. In this respect, Wilde's play is not a mere "social commentary" on the Victorian English "moralism" and "hypocrisy" (Hussein, 30), but a satirical representation of the infidelity of the upper class.

In all the four plays written by Wilde, most of the male characters of high birth behave like cunning villains, always involved in sexual and social mores transgression. Sos Detis is therefore right when she argues, in her insightful book *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1996), that Wilde's plays "offer many theatrical clichés, stereotypes of the vulnerable woman who becomes a victim of male depravity…" (96).

Oscar Wilde's comedies persistently dramatise the English upper class people's irrepressible sexual drive. This is conspicuous in Lord Goring's and Tommy Stratford's relentless attempt to seduce Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. The bachelors' frivolous attitude to sex and wedded men's unfaithfulness is chronicled in *A Woman of no Importance.* Lord Windermere's extra marital love affair with Mrs. Erlynn and Lord Darlington's attempt to elope with Lady Windermere are highlighted in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Together, these four plays illustrate the playwright's satiric attack on ideal Victorian morality.

Conclusion

The analysis of the four plays provides evidence that Wilde's comedies of manners challenge the Victorian gentry's social mores. The paper also shows that Victorian society's unrealistic expectations of the individual ultimately results to deceitful engagement in a double life in order to satisfy conventions. In each of the plays, such manners as class-consciousness, idleness, hypocrisy, and cant are light-heartedly exposed and vilified.

The contribution sheds light on Wilde's artistic perspective and his uncompromising aesthetic stance which often challenges the hypocritical and rigid social norms and morality of his time. As a social critic, he skillfully questions or undermines the conventional values of Victorian society through witty dramatisation of the misconduct and deviation of the protagonists in his writings.

Therefore, reading Wilde's works as dramatic comedies that satirise his contemporary's fashionable society and its manners, as well as social expectations can be cited as the best tribute to the playwright.

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