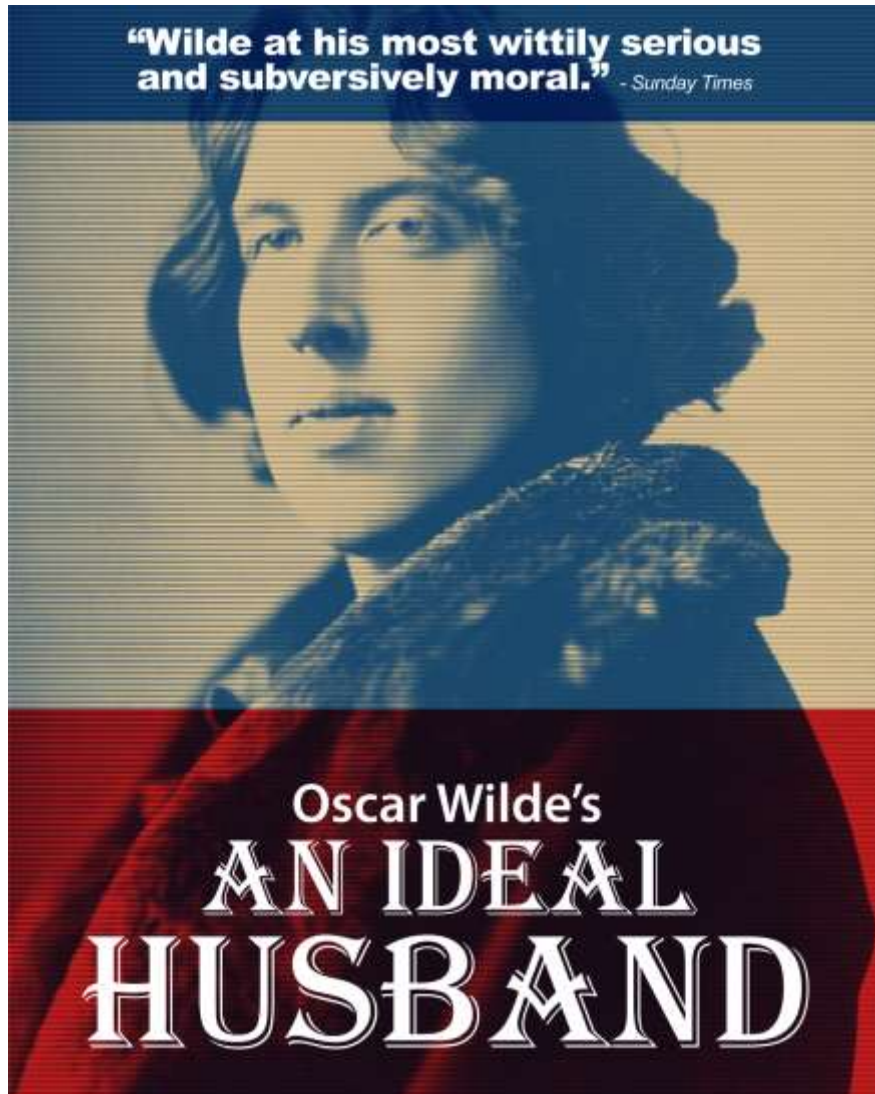




A Study Guide for Educators



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American Stage Theatre

American Stage is Tampa Bay's best professional regional Equity theatre. Founded in 1977, the company's mission is to create the most satisfying live theatre in the Tampa Bay area, accessible to all members of the community. The vision of American Stage is



to preserve the greatest human stories from our past, while creating the most defining stories and storytelling of our time.

American Stage presents its six-play Mainstage Series in its 182-seat Raymond James Theatre each year. The very popular American Stage in the Park celebrates its 26th Anniversary year. The theatre's other programming includes: "After Hours" Series, School Tour, and camps and classes for children and adults.

It is American Stage Theatre Company's goal to share the enriching experience of live theatre. This study guide is intended to help you prepare for your visit to American Stage. Should you have any comments or suggestions regarding this study guide, or if you need more information about scheduling trips to see an American Stage production, please feel free to contact us:

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The *Ideal Husband* study guide was compiled and written by Meg Heimstead. Teachers are permitted to copy any and all parts of this guide for use in the classroom.

Theatre

Elements of Theatre

1. Theatre usually engages many forms of art including:

- Writing
- Visual/Design
 - Scenery & Props
 - Costumes
 - Sound
 - Lighting
 - Casting
- Music
- Dance/Movement

2. Elements of Drama:

- **Character**
WHO are the characters and what is their relationship to each other?
- **Plot/Story**
WHAT is the story line?
What happened before the play started?
What do the characters want?
What will they do to get it?
What do they stand to gain or lose?
- **Setting**
WHERE does the story take place?
How does this affect the characters' behavior?
How does it affect the plot?
How does it affect the design?
- **Time**
WHEN does the story take place?
What year is it? What season? What time of day?
How does this affect the characters, plot and design of the play?

Other Elements to Explore

Conflict/Resolution, Action, Improvisation, Non-verbal communications, Staging, Humor, Realism and other styles, Metaphor, Language, Tone, Pattern and repetition, Emotion, Point of view.

General Questions

*These **questions** were designed to promote classroom **discussion** of any play. Use these questions as a model to help you design your own analysis techniques.*

1. How does the play start?
2. What does the playwright do to set the scene? How are the characters introduced?
3. What other techniques does the play use to help you jump into the story?
4. Who is the main character?
 - What does he/she want? (Objective)
 - How will he/she get it? (Actions/Tactics)
 - What is stopping him/her? (Obstacles)
 - How does the character change throughout the play?
5. Why is the play set in the time period that it is? How would the play be different if the time period was different?
6. Is there a character who helps the main character come to decisions and changes? How? Opposition? Reflection?
7. Is there a villain/antagonist in the play? Does there need to be a good character and a bad one?
8. What makes the play relevant? What makes it important?
9. What are the elements that make this piece suitable for the stage, as opposed television, film or a novel?

An Ideal Husband

Exploring the Play

About the Playwright – Oscar Wilde

From the Open Stage Theatre Company's *An Ideal Husband* study guide



Oscar Wilde was born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, the second son of a distinguished Irish family. His father was an eye surgeon, knighted for his services to medicine in 1864. Jane Francesca Elgee, his mother, was a poet, journalist and revolutionary. Oscar attended boarding school from 1864 to 1871, and then read Classics at Trinity College. The influential Classics scholar, J. P. Mahaffy, took him on tours of Italy and Greece. Wilde graduated with a First Class Degree in 1874 and won a scholarship to Magdalen College at Oxford. He graduated from there in 1878 with First Class Honors in Classics. He also studied the art and philosophy of various schools of Aestheticism, choosing between attractive but contradictory theories about the cultural value of art. Wilde's first publications appeared at Oxford: an elegy for his father who died in 1876, and a review of the opening exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery in London. In 1878 Wilde won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for Poetry. Reading his winning

poem to an academic audience was an auspicious beginning for his career as a lecturer.

Wilde moved to London in 1879, and wrote his first published play, *Vera*, in 1880. In December 1881 London theatre manager, D'Oyly Carte sent Wilde to America on a lecture tour. The lectures were conceived as a promotion for D'Oyly Carte's American tour of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, *Patience*. *Patience* satirizes the Aesthetic Movement and has a central character, poet Bunthorne, who resembles Wilde. Wilde refused to be the patsy. He lectured on the Aesthetic Movement, touring across North America and Canada. His eccentric dress, pithy interview style and the content of his lectures, as reported by newspapers, ensured that Wilde stole the limelight. He emerged from the experience a seasoned public speaker and a cult figure on both sides of the Atlantic.

““Every good man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.” – Oscar Wilde *“The Critic as Artist,”* 1891

About the Playwright – Oscar Wilde (continued)

In January 1883, he settled in Paris to write his second play, *The Duchess of Padua*. After a brief trip to New York for a disappointing premier of *Vera* in August, he started a lecture tour in Britain that lasted until his high-profile wedding to Dublin-born Constance Lloyd in May 1884. His first two plays were never successfully produced. Oscar and Constance honeymooned in Paris and Dieppe before moving into their Chelsea home. Marriage required Wilde to support his family, and he embarked on a six-year stint as a journalist, reviewing fiction, non-fiction and plays on a weekly basis for newspapers. Sons Cyril and Vyvyan were born in 1885 and 1886. In 1887 Wilde was hired as editor for "The Ladies World". He re-titled the magazine "The Woman's World" and changed its format, moving away from society gossip and fashion. He established a number of pioneering ideas for women's journalism and solicited artistic and political copy from women. After two years he gave up the post, leaving behind a successful magazine.



During his editorship he wrote fairy tales for his sons, publishing his first collection, *The "Happy Prince and Other Tales"*, in 1888. His novella, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," was published in America and Britain in 1891. It provoked public outrage in both places due to the dissipation of his central character. Also in 1891 Wilde published dialogues on criticism ("Intentions") and two collections of short stories. He spent November and December in Paris writing his symbolist play *Salome* in French. *Salome* opened a period of extraordinary creativity for Wilde. It also initiated an intense but troubled homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde was introduced to homosexuality by art critic/journalist Robert Ross, whom he met in 1886. Ross would remain one of Wilde's most loyal friends.

Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie) at Oxford in 1891. His passionate commitment to the relationship began in 1892. Douglas was the third son of the irascible Marquess of Queensberry, who was infuriated by their affair. The affair was soon an open "secret." Constance had to face Wilde's estrangement from his family.

In February 1892 Wilde enjoyed his first big success on the London stage with *Lady Windermere's Fan*. This comedy played London and the provinces through November 1892, netting Wilde £7000. But his attempt to stage *Salome* in London starring Sarah Bernhardt was thwarted by the Lord Chamberlain, who had the play banned. In 1893 *A Woman of No Importance* opened at the Haymarket Theatre, followed by *An Ideal Husband* in January 1895. His masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, opened at the St James's Theatre in February 1895 to critical acclaim and packed houses.

About the Playwright – Oscar Wilde (continued)

However, Wilde's nemesis was waiting in the wings. The Marquess of Queensberry sent Wilde an accusatory card. Wilde charged Queensberry with criminal libel. The case was tried at the Old Bailey in April 1895 and Queensberry was acquitted in two days. Wilde was immediately arrested and charged with "acts of gross indecency with other male persons." Homosexuality was a criminal offense in English law at this time. He was refused bail and taken to Holloway Prison to await trial. Douglas visited him frequently. On the advice of friends, Douglas left England before the trial began to avoid being called as a witness. Queensberry forced a bankruptcy sale of all Wilde's possessions to cover the costs of the libel trial. Wilde's first trial lasted four days. The jury failed to reach a verdict. Wilde was released on bail pending a second trial. Friends urged him to leave England immediately. Constance also sent a message urging him to go. Wilde refused. He was convicted in his second trial and sentenced to two years of hard labor at Reading Gaol. Douglas deserted him throughout his imprisonment. Constance initiated divorce proceedings but cancelled them in the hope of a restored family life on his release. Wilde was declared bankrupt in November 1895, and in February 1896 his mother died. Constance traveled from Italy to Reading to give him the sad news. In 1897 Wilde composed a long letter to Douglas, eventually published by Ross as an autobiography ("De Profundis") after Wilde's death.

Wilde was released from prison in May 1897. He went into exile in France. Correspondence between Oscar and Constance suggested a possible but unrealized reconciliation. Wilde and Douglas met in Naples in 1897. After a final rupture with Douglas, Wilde settled in Paris in 1898 and published "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". "The Ballad" sold over seven thousand copies within sixteen months of its publication. Constance died in April 1898, but Wilde was not allowed access to his sons. Wilde died of meningitis triggered by a chronic ear infection on November 30, 1900. He was 46. Robert Ross was at his bedside.

Wilde's literary reputation is now as high as it was at the pinnacle of his achievement in the 1890s, and his biography has a unique cultural significance in the history of gay politics. The publication of his letters by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1962 and his biography by Richard Ellmann in 1987 were major turning points in the reassessment of Wilde and his work

"Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it." –
Oscar Wilde *"The Critic as Artist,"* 1891

***An Ideal Husband* – Production History**

From enotes.com

An Ideal Husband premiered at London's Theatre Royal Haymarket on January 3, 1895, directed by Lewis Waller, who also played Sir Robert Chiltern. The production transferred to the Criterion Theatre on April 13, 1895, but was withdrawn on April 27, the day after Wilde's trial for "gross indecency" began. There have been numerous British revivals of the play, prominent among them Peter Hall's long-running production in the mid-1990s, which ran in various provincial and London theatres with casts that included Simon Ward, Martin Shaw, Richard Todd, and Kate O'Mara. Hall's production opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on May 1, 1998, and ran for 307 performances. The American première of *An Ideal Husband* was on March 12, 1895, at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, directed by Daniel Frohman.

There have been three film versions of *An Ideal Husband*. Michael Wilding and Diana Wynyard starred in a 1947 version directed by Alexandra Korda; James Wilby, Prunella Scales, and Jonathan Firth in a 1998 version directed by William P. Cartledge; and Julianne Moore, Cate Blanchett, Rupert Everett, and Simon Russell Beale in a 1999 version directed by Oliver Parker.



**"It is not the perfect but the imperfect who have need of love." –
*Sir Robert Chiltern "An Ideal Husband"***

An Ideal Husband - Critical Comments

From the Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

George Bernard Shaw comments on the original production: “Mr. Oscar Wilde’s new play at the Haymarket is a dangerous subject, because he has the property of making his critics dull. Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything; with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre.”

When asked by a reporter, “What do you think is the chief point the critics have missed in your new play?”, Wilde answers: “Its entire psychology — the difference in the way in which a man loves a woman from that in which a woman loves a man, the passion that women have for making ideals (which is their weakness) and the weakness of a man who dares not show his imperfections to the thing he loves. The end of Act I, the end of Act II and the scene in the last act, when Lord Goring points out the higher importance of a man’s life over a woman’s — to take three prominent instances — seem to have been quite missed by most of the critics. They failed to see their meaning; they really thought that it was a play about a bracelet...” (extract from Gilbert Burgess, ‘A Talk with Mr. Oscar Wilde’ *The Sketch* 9 Jan. 1895 quoted in Tydeman Comedies)

“... much of the characterization and a good deal of the dialogue is admirable either in its truth to life or in its literary cleverness. Mr. Wilde knows the fashionable world, and supplies of it a graphic and effective picture...” (Morning Post Jan. 4, 1895 quoted in Tydeman Comedies)

“*An Ideal Husband*...has as a central theme the hazards of precipitate and inflexible moral judgment....and the way in which that judgment has to be modified. If Lady Chiltern demands an ideal husband this is intimately connected with the requirement that he must be an ideal politician. Corruption in the one sphere is, for her, corruption in the other.” (Ian Gregor)

“Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.” – *Oscar Wilde*

Plot Summary

From The Taproot Theatre's *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

Time Period: 1900

Setting: London

Sir Robert Chiltern is a prominent politician of impeccable moral character. His wife, Gertrude, idolizes him as the ideal man and believes that he has no faults.

Gertrude's ideal is shattered when Mrs. Cheveley arrives in town. Mrs. Cheveley knows that at the beginning of his career Sir Robert gained his wealth and position by taking part in an illegal fraud. Mrs. Cheveley is blackmailing Sir Robert and threatening to expose him to the world.

Sir Robert cares less about losing his reputation than he does about losing his wife's love, but when Gertrude finds out his guilty secret, she rejects him.

Lord Goring is Sir Robert's best friend and is in love with Robert's sister, Mabel Chiltern. Estranged from each other, both Robert and Gertrude turn to Lord Goring for help and advice. It is up to Lord Goring to foil Mrs. Cheveley's schemes, to help his friends see that love requires forgiveness, and to somehow convince Miss Mabel to marry him.



Characters

The following character overviews come directly from Oscar Wilde's own descriptions of the characters.

Sir Robert Chiltern

- Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs
- "Clean shaven with finely cut features. A personality of mark. The note of his manner is that of a perfect distinction with a slight touch of pride."

Lady Chiltern

- Wife to Sir Robert Chiltern
- "A woman of grave Greek beauty"

Mabel Chiltern

- Sir Robert Chiltern's sister
- "Perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the appleblossom type. Has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence."

Lord Goring

- Lord Caversham's son
- Friend of Sir Robert Chiltern.
- "A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy...plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. "

Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont

- Friends of the Chilterns
- "Exquisite fragility. Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm. Watteau would have loved to paint them."

Lord Caversham

- Lord Goring's father
- "An old gentlemen wearing the riband and star of the Garter. A fine Whig type"

"To love oneself is the beginning of a life long romance." – *Lord Goring*, "An Ideal Husband"

Characters (continued)

Mrs. Cheveley

- Lady Chiltern's former schoolmate.
- "Sir Robert Chiltern's blackmailer Tall and rather slight. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose and long throat. Grey-green eyes that move restlessly. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful"



Lady Markby

- Friend of the Chilterns
- "A pleasant, kindly, popular woman, with grey hair and good lace."

Vicomte De Nanjac

- Attaché at the French Embassy in London
- "Known for his neckties and his Anglomania."

Phipps

- Butler to Lord Goring
- "He is a mask with a manner. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler."

"I always pass along good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself." – *Lord Goring, "An Ideal Husband"*

Themes

From enotes.com

Scandal, Hypocrisy, and the Ideal

Cautioning Sir Robert that she will indeed carry out her threat and ruin his career, Mrs. Cheveley declares:

Remember to what point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbors. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man—now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it.

Here, in a nutshell, is the central message of Wilde's play: the more a culture upholds stringent moral values, the more likely it is that publicly prominent people will crumble under charges of impropriety. By this Wilde does not mean that immorality or criminal behavior is acceptable. What he means is that an exaggerated attachment to moral purity leads to social ills and not social good. This might seem counterintuitive; after all, should not the respect for moral purity lead to more people being truly good? For Wilde, it just leads to more people being failures in their own eyes and others' because it is impossible for most people not to make a mistake at some point in their lives. It encourages people not to hide even their minor vices, but to proclaim loudly against any and all weakness, thereby becoming hypocrites and paving the way for their greater shame if they are ever found out for their true selves. As Mrs. Cheveley's speech makes clear, in the Victorian climate of intolerance, politicians and other social leaders were pressured to proclaim themselves paragons of purity when they were not.

Consequently, when the truth of their large or small sins came to the surface, their careers and reputations were compromised or ruined.

Mrs. Cheveley's speech was not only meant for Wilde's British audiences but also for his avid American audiences. This is not simply because America was culturally close to England but also because of pertinent American history and its continuing influence on American life. Some of the first Europeans to settle in the United States were members of Puritan sects, and what these Christian fundamentalists are most remembered for is their period of hysteria and cruelty. In their pursuit of moral purity they saw evil everywhere, declared numerous persons witches, and burned them alive (the "witch trials"). Extremism, in other words, leads only and always to tragedy, even if it is extremism in the name of good.

In short, says Wilde, it is better to be a Goring, who does not pretend to be good, than to be a hypocrite. *An Ideal Husband's* play on things "ideal" or pure is related to its cautionary message about the Victorian obsession with perfect goodness.

Themes (continued)

The coupling of Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring is Wilde's antidote to the Chilterns. Mabel, notably, declares that she wants to be a "good" wife to Lord Goring, not a perfect or ideal one. Lord Goring, perhaps, is Wilde's version of a good enough husband, as he readily admits that he has faults. The human race, Wilde seems to say, will always fall short of its ideals, but this should not be occasion for tragedy. On the contrary, what leads to tragedy is insisting that perfection must be achieved even after the best that can be done has been tried.

From gradesaver.com

Modernity

The characters in the play are highly concerned with the fashions of the day. Lady Markby comments that Mabel is becoming increasingly modern, and warns her of the danger associated with such change, as a tendency towards modernity allows for more rapidly becoming out of date. Likewise, Lady Markby preoccupies herself with the modern infatuation with curates, and notes that the citizens of overpopulated England tend to jostle and scramble a great deal nowadays. Wilde references modernity throughout the play, regardless of topic or scene, and often associates it with unpleasantness. Notably, Sir Robert comments that every modern fortune is built on private information, thus arguing for the necessity of political corruption. Moreover, Lord Goring comments that Mrs. Cheveley is most likely one of those modern women who fancy new scandals. The general fear of modernity suggests a social weakness of an inability to accept change. Most of the play's characters, despite claiming an interest in modern culture, seem to wish for social conformity.

Forgiveness

The question of forgiveness runs throughout *An Ideal Husband*. As Sir Robert angrily tells his wife that she has placed him up on a monstrous pedestal, he tells her that it is when men are wounded that they are most in need of love and forgiveness. As he puts it, love forgives. Much like the question, "Are you a pessimist or an optimist?" the decision to forgive determines the quality of the characters' moral fortitude. Mrs.



Cheveley stands as the one character beyond forgiveness. In Act III, Lord Goring explains that Mrs. Cheveley's attempt to kill Lady Chiltern's love for her husband is an unforgivable act. However, when Sir Robert appears at Lord Goring's house in desperate need of advice, believing he has killed his wife's love for him, Lord Goring maintains that she will forgive him. Lord Goring understands that the act of forgiveness is a crucial part of marriage, and through it we acknowledge universal human imperfection. Therefore, love and forgiveness are inseparable throughout the play. When love is present, there is the possibility of forgiveness. Human imperfection inherently requires love and forgiveness from others.

Themes (continued)

The Role of Women in Society

Much of the play provides commentary on the role of women in society. Sir Robert asks Mrs. Cheveley if she thinks science can grapple with the problem of women, which sets up the play's suggestion that women are highly complex. In the final act, Lord Goring gives a speech to Lady Chiltern about the role of women in society and in marriage, stressing the importance of supporting a husband in pursuing what he loves rather than stifling his desires. She takes his advice to heart and urges her husband to continue his public service. Lord Goring often draws a clear distinction between the role of men and women in society and in marriage. In Act III, he thinks to himself that all women should stand by their husbands. Lord Caversham suggests that only men, and not women, are endowed with common sense.

Although many of the male characters have problems with the women, many women have problems with the men. Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are miserable with their husbands, and fed up with their perfection. Mrs. Markby and Mrs. Cheveley believe that men need education, but doubt their capacity to develop. Lady Markby and Lady Basildon, and Mrs. Marchmont also comment on the role of women. Lady Markby talks about modern women, deriding their higher education, a topic that Lady Chiltern rigorously defends. She explains that in the past, women were taught not to understand anything, but that the modern woman is far more knowledgeable. Thus, women have a complex role within the play. The coexistence of men and women often seems a constant struggle, but one that is ultimately beneficial to all.

From enotes.com

Ambition

Politicians in late-nineteenth-century England were not terribly different from politicians today. They saw themselves as public servants and entered into politics to do some good and make a difference. Yet, to go far in politics it takes ambition. Politicians who aim to reach high positions in the government have to have nerves of steel and very thick skins. They are ruthlessly attacked by members of the opposing party; even others in their own party will attempt to outmaneuver them; journalists will dig into their private lives and print anything that will sell a magazine or newspaper; and so forth. Thus, in addition to wanting to do good, a politician aiming for the top has to be very ambitious. He or she has to have some craving for glory that makes all the pain of getting to the top bearable. In the ferociously ambitious Sir Robert Chiltern, Wilde presents just this type of politician. In doing so, he has presented his highly successful politician accurately. After all, Chiltern is only forty but he is already an under-secretary, and, at the end of the play, the prime minister offers him a cabinet position.

This depiction of the politician's hungry ambition makes sense in *An Ideal Husband*. The play is concerned with having people adopt a realistic view of the world and how it works; consequently, Wilde avoids an idealized picture of the motivations of top-ranking politicians.

Style

Wit

Wit as a type of humor is what Wilde is known for, both in his everyday life and in a number of his writings, including *An Ideal Husband*. Wit is clever humor—not bawdy, rude, silly, or visual funniness. Wit entails the delivery of an unexpected or surprising insight, or a clever reversal of expectations. For example, at one point in the play, Mrs. Cheveley says, “a woman’s first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn’t it? What the second duty is, no one has yet discovered.” This would have provoked laughter because the popular saying she is reversing is as follows: “A woman’s first duty is to her husband.” Victorians were known for their commitment to duty and there would have been not one person in Wilde’s audience who had not heard and read the popular axiom many, many times.

Epigram and Aphorism

Epigrammatic turns of speech are short and sweet, and they are somehow surprising or witty. Wilde’s characters’ wit is often epigrammatic. For example, as Mrs. Cheveley says at one point, “Oh! I don’t care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them.” Mrs. Cheveley’s purported reason for disliking the London social season is funny. Even funnier is that what makes the season “matrimonial” is not simply the search for husbands.

An aphorism is a brief statement containing an opinion or general truth, which might or might not be witty. Wilde excelled in wit in the form of aphorisms. Lady Cheveley, for example, delivers quite a few aphoristic witticisms in *An Ideal Husband*. For example, “Morality,” she says, “is simply the attitude we take toward people whom we personally dislike.” Or, as she says elsewhere: “Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.” There is also Lord Goring’s opinion about good advice. In reply to Mabel Chiltern when she questions his having told her it’s past her bedtime, Lord Goring says, “My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don’t see why I shouldn’t give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never any use to oneself.”



Style (continued)

Comedy of Manners

While Wilde has a serious plot and message in *An Ideal Husband*, the play is mostly comic. As such, it is close to a form of dramatic comedy known as the comedy of manners. Comedies of manners are mostly associated with eighteenth century Europe, although they date back to the beginnings of European drama. A comedy of manners is a play whose purpose is to satirize human vagaries. They focus on a particular stratum of society and make fun of that group's pettiness, hypocrisies, vanities, failings, and so forth. In *An Ideal Husband*, for example, Wilde satirizes the hypocrisy of the English ruling classes through his portrait of Sir Robert Chiltern. Comedies of manners are also characterized by their wit, i.e., the way that the characters' dialogue is composed mostly of clever and funny bantering. This explains Wilde's attraction to the form.

Melodrama

Melodramas tell their stories through sensational and improbable characters and turns of event. For example, villains are thoroughly villainous in melodrama, and heroes and heroines are purity itself. Rings, letters, gloves and such items are lost and found in ways that lead to all sorts of revelations and complications of plot. Heroines often end up in terrible danger, but the hero always arrives at the last moment to save the day, and so forth. Wilde employs some stock melodramatic situations and events in *An Ideal Husband*. For example, the detail of the incriminating letter from the past and the blackmail scheme on which the plot turns are melodramatic flourishes.

Problem Play

What are called problem plays were first written in Europe in the late nineteenth century. They are called this because they tackle some pressing social development of the day. For example, the playwright credited with introducing the form in its purest, earliest form is Henrik Ibsen, whose *A Doll's House* took on the issue of feminism: the struggles of Europe's "new" women and their families. If critics have difficulty calling *An Ideal Husband* a comedy of manners, and some prefer the term "social comedy," this is because the play has a serious element to it. This serious component reflects Wilde's respect for the problem play.

An Ideal Husband

Exploring the Context of the Play

The Victorian Era

From The Taproot Theatre's *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

The Victorian Period in England was an era of improvements. Victorians seemed to have a positive mania for it. The Victorians improved public housing and public parks. They redesigned London's sewers for better sanitation. They built many of the public buildings that characterize London today (the British Museum, Albert Hall, The Parliamentary Buildings at Westminster, Big Ben) even Buckingham House got a complete overhaul to become Buckingham Palace.

The reforms also embraced government and policy makers as Britain scrambled to keep up with the changing world of the Industrial Revolution. Laws were passed that improved working conditions in the factories, required education for all classes, and that redesigned England's voting laws to give better representation. The advances in science, medicine, and technology during the 19th century were vast. There seemed to be nothing that human thought and human will could not improve. And it is perhaps inevitable that along with the making of ideal societies and systems, the Victorians should also attempt to make ideal men and women.



London in 1900

London Society

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

'The Season'

The social season or Season referred to the annual period when it was customary for elite members of society to hold debutante balls, dinner parties, and large charity events. It was also the appropriate time to be living in the city rather than in the country, in order to attend such events. In London society, the Season traditionally began after Easter and ended with the "Glorious Twelfth", beginning the shooting season for red grouse.

In this era the British elite was dominated by landowning aristocratic and gentry families who generally regarded their country house as their main home, but spent several months of the year in the capital to socialize and engage in politics. The most exclusive events were held at town mansions of leading members of the aristocracy. The Season coincided with the sitting of Parliament and began some time after Christmas and ran until midsummer. The social season also played a role in the political life of the country: the members of the two Houses of Parliament were almost all participants in the season. But the Season was also a chance for the children of marriageable age of the nobility and gentry to be launched into society. Women were formally introduced into society by presentation to the monarch at Court. According to the peerage guide Debrett's, the traditional Social Season runs from April to August.

Boodle's Club

A members-only private club originally set up by and for English upper class men. The clubs were, in effect, "second homes" in the centre of London where men could relax, mix with their friends, play parlor games, get a meal, and in some clubs, stay overnight. They allowed upper- and upper-middle-class men to spend their time in grand surroundings; the richer clubs were built by the same architects as the finest country houses of the time, with the same types of interiors. They also were a convenient retreat for men who wished to get away from their female relations.

Grosvenor Square

Grosvenor Square is a large garden square in the exclusive Mayfair district of London, England. It was one of the most fashionable residential addresses in London and home to many of the leading members of the aristocracy.

"...I don't care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands or hiding from them." – Mrs. Cheveley, *"An Ideal Husband"*

Political Corruption

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

Political corruption is the use of legislated powers by government officials for illegitimate private gain. An illegal act by an officeholder constitutes political corruption when the act directly relates to their official duties. As a young man, Sir Robert Chiltern was persuaded to sell a Cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim. Sir Robert made his fortune with that illicit money.

Blackmail

A threat to reveal true information about a person to the public, a family member, or associates unless a demand upon the victim is met. The information is usually embarrassing, socially damaging, and/or criminally incriminating. Blackmail is a crime. As the information is true, the act of revealing the information itself may not be criminal. The crime is in making demands in exchange for withholding information.

The Second Panama Canal Scandal

After the Panama Canal project floundered in 1889, with massive debts and unaccounted for expenditures, a national scandal in France resulted in legal action against the speculators, who were revealed to have involved senators and deputies in the corruption. A series of trials took place in Paris in 1892-1893 but one of the principal backers of the scheme, Baron Jaques Reinach, took his life on the day he was to face the court. This scandal also becomes known as the 'Panama Affair'.

DISCUSS:

Two contrasting characters. Two contrasting attitudes...

Mrs Cheveley: *"Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is."*

Sir Robert Chiltern: *"No one should be entirely judged by their past."*

Debate the pros and cons of each statement. Discuss the interesting contrast between the past that truly existed and the past that's recorded — then later interpreted as reality.

"Scandals used to lend charm, or at the very least, interest to a man — now they crush him." — *Mrs. Cheveley, "An Ideal Husband"*

Public Figures, Private Lives

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

Read the following extract from Oscar Wilde's essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (published in 1891) in which Oscar Wilde expresses his opinion of the press:

In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press... The fact is that the public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing. Journalism, conscious of this, and having tradesman-like habits, supplies their demands... The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all.

DISCUSS: Do you agree with Wilde's opinion?

Why might he feel so strongly about the press making the private affairs of well-known figures publicly available? Would Sir Robert command more respect from the reader/audience if he came clean to the public?

The Invention of the Tabloids

For better or worse, one of the enduring inventions of the Victorian era is the tabloid press. Though having the appearance of traditional newspapers, the new journalism of the 1880s was filled with sex and scandal.

*"...as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else."
– Lady Markby, "An Ideal Husband"*

Public Figures, Private Lives (continued)

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

Does the Public Have a Right to Know?

The legal freedom to investigate and publish details of public figures' private lives varies from country to country. We all value the right to privacy while at the same time, we should be able to scrutinize public figures' behavior. Let's look at some possible arguments for and against airing private business

| PROS | CONS |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have a right to know about those in power over them. • Decisions of public political figures affect many aspects of people's lives so people should be able to make informed judgments about the character of their leaders. • Attempts to restrict the kinds of information that can be reported about public figures could become a conspiracy to keep voters from knowing critical information. • To an extent, elections are about the characters of the politicians involved. Insight into their private lives may provide information needed to make a fair decision at the polling booth. • Knowing a politician betrayed their spouse in an affair demonstrates untrustworthy behavior. Such a person might also be capable of breaking promises or lying to their country for their own personal gain. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Public interest" and what the public is interested in are not necessarily the same thing. • Public figures should not be held to higher standards of personal behavior than the rest of society by sensationalist media seeking to sell newspapers. • Democracy would be better served if newspapers were forced to focus on the policies and public actions of politicians, rather than their personal foibles. • Private morality and eccentricities don't necessarily correlate to someone's ability to do a job well. • A great political leader could have a messy personal life, while someone with a blameless private life, might be judged a failure in office. |

| PROS (continued) | CONS (continued) |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If investigative journalists are prevented from scrutinizing the private lives of public figures, then corruption and crime will be easier to hide. <p>DISCUSS:</p> <p>Just how does a senior civil servant afford a Ferrari, a yacht and a villa in Monaco on his government salary?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Such close press scrutiny actually places public figures under considerable strain, making for both poor performance in office and personal problems such as marital breakdown more likely. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is impossible to draw a clear dividing line between public and private behavior. Drawing up rules will be arbitrary and will exclude at least some corrupt or dishonest behavior of bearing. <p>DISCUSS:</p> <p>President Mitterand of France hid his cancer from the French electorate for years. Was this a public or a private matter? He also had a mistress and illegitimate daughter, who were secretly taken on some of his foreign visits at state expense. Is this a private or a public matter?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continual probing into the private lives of public figures harms the functioning of democracy. The prospect of fierce and unforgiving press scrutiny will deter many from seeking public office and deny their talents to the public good. Those who do present themselves for election will therefore tend to be rather unrepresentative individuals of a puritanical nature, whose views on sex, family life, etc. may be skewed and intolerant as a result. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many politicians make explicit campaign points about their family values as well as their policy stands on such issues as divorce, single mothers, sex education, drugs, etc. If the public image such people seek to create is at variance with their own practice, such hypocrisy deserves to be exposed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When personal morality and family life is deliberately and explicitly used by a politician as a reason for them to be elected, then they have chosen to make it a public issue rather than a private one. This does not justify intrusion into the privacy of those politicians who do not parade their personal lives as a campaign method. |

An Ideal Victorian Woman

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide



The Angel of the House

The Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be known as the “Angel in the House”; she was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious and, above all, pure. Initially this ideal primarily expressed the values of the middle classes. However, Queen Victoria devoted herself to her husband Prince Albert and represented a kind of femininity that was centered on family, motherhood, respectability and domestic life, and the ideal was then widely adopted by nineteenth century society. She was seen as the model of marital stability and domestic virtue.

Search "woman" in *An Ideal Husband* and you'll come by lots of zingers. "Women represent the irrational." "Women have a wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious." "A man's life is of more value than a woman's." In 1890s England, women simply weren't considered men's equals or colleagues in public life. An equal right to vote came in 1928. There are many unpleasant words about (and between) women in this play. But look at their actions. These women are aware of their power over men and they use it, whether for love or hate.

DISCUSS:

1. How do women negotiate within their given roles of exerting influence?
2. What do the generational differences of opinion in the play say about women at the turn of the century?
3. How are Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley different models of feminine power?
4. How would women behave differently if the play were set in 21st century America?

An Ideal Victorian Woman (continued)

From The Shaw Festival *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

The New Woman

Marriage was a popular topic for plays in Oscar Wilde's time. It's still popular today. Remember all those movies in which a young couple fight and break up, but make up in time for the credits? Same thing here. The characters mill around in a comic fog of misunderstanding and hardheadedness until their needs for each other (with a little meddling) overcomes the odds. They learn to be honest, to forgive, to commit, and to give. In *An Ideal Husband*, marriage seems to be a generally desirable institution. Only the villain stays single.

DISCUSS:

1. If Oscar Wilde were performing a wedding ceremony, what advice would he give to the newlyweds?
2. Will Lord Goring and Mabel have a happy marriage? Why or why not?
3. What did Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern learn about each other that may make them more compatible?
4. Do you think Mrs. Cheveley is capable of love? What sort of fellow would be the lucky man?



An Ideal Victorian Man

Excerpts taken from *Manners for Men* by Mrs Humphry.

The Ideal Changes with the Idealist

“I suppose there was never yet a woman who had not somewhere set up on a pedestal in her brain an ideal of manhood. If ... the woman whose ideal he is grows upward in every way as she grows older, then these changes all go to improve him, and by the time he is finished he is a very fine creature. He never is finished till the brain of his creator ceases to work, till she has added her last touch to him, and has laid down the burden of life and gone elsewhere, perhaps to some happy land where ideals are more frequently realized than ever happens here.”

My Ideal Man

“First of all, he must be a gentleman; but that means so much that it, in its turn, requires explanation. Gentleness and moral strength combined must be the salient characteristics of the ‘gentleman’. He must be thoughtful for others, kind to women and children and all helpless things, tender-hearted to the old and the poor and the unhappy, but never foolishly weak in giving where gifts do harm instead of good.”

A Man’s Brain Should be as Fine as his Heart

“There are few such men; but they do exist. Reliable as rocks, judicious in every action, dependable in trifles as well as the large affairs of life, full of mercy and kindness to others, affectionate and well-loved in their home, their lives are pure and kindly.”

The Furnace of Experience

“It was once said by a clever man that no one could be a gentleman all round who had not knocked about the world and associated with all sorts and conditions of men, high and low, rich and poor, good and bad. Experiences like these are like the processes for refining gold. The man who emerges unharmed from the fire of poverty and its associations, and who retains his independent manliness in relations with those high-placed, must have within him a fiber of strength that is the true essence of manliness.”

Humor an Essential

“He must have a sense of humor, too, otherwise he would be far from perfect.. How life is brightened by a sense of fun. Think of what breakfast, lunch, and dinner would be if all were to be as solemn and as serious as some would have it!”



Victorian Manners

From The Taproot Theatre's *An Ideal Husband* Study Guide

Victorians had very particular rules about polite behavior. For example:

- The hours for walking and sitting in the Park are from 4 to 7 p.m. during the summer months.
- A young lady can walk by herself in the Park for the purpose of joining her friends and acquaintances, but she should not sit alone.
- When riding in a carriage, a husband should sit with his back to the horses if another lady is riding with his wife.
- A gentlemen should be the first to get out of the carriage with a view to assisting the ladies to do so.
- It would be unconventional were a lady to drive alone with a gentlemen unless he were nearly related to her or unless she were engaged to be married to him.
- When greeting friends and acquaintances ladies and gentlemen should bow and/or shake hands.
- A lady should not bow to a person only known to her by sight, although she may frequently have seen them in the company of her friends.
- The bow should be a graceful bend, or inclination of the head; not a hasty movement, nor a stiff jerk.
- When bowing gentlemen should raise his hat, indeed take it off his head, but not with a sudden flourish, or seize it with a sudden dash.
- The proper way to shake hands: Take the hand that you are offered firmly; be careful to grasp the hand, not the fingers merely, give it a gentle pressure, and then relinquish it; do not lift it up to shake, neither let it drop suddenly.
- A lady's step should be firm and her gait steady, let her not walk in too great a hurry, nor yet drag slowly along. Let her arms move with the natural motion of the body; they must neither swing to and fro nor dangle by the side.
- A man should take a longer step than a woman, but steadiness and firmness of tread are as necessary for men as for women.
- In the house a gentlemen may change his sitting position in infinity of ways, lounge and loll, cross his legs, do anything but sit on the edge of his chair or clasp his hands around his knee. A woman, however, must sit still and upright and must not cross her legs.
- A woman's hands should also be still. The hands, if not occupied are so apt to fidget either with each other or with some part of the face or dress. Very often it is a nervous habit; but it should be at once and finally repressed.

“What dreadful manners you have! I am sure you were very badly brought up.” – *Mabel Chiltern, “An Ideal Husband”*

Terms Used in the Play

Achilles' Statue - The naked, heroic statue of Achilles in Hyde Park was erected in 1822, inscribed by 'the women of England' to the Duke of Wellington and his army.

Adam Room - Room designed and decorated by one or both of the brothers Adam, Scottish architects who transformed London architecture and interior decoration in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Anglomania - excessive respect for English customs.

apathy - demonstrated by an absence of emotional reactions.

Assisted Emigration - Frequently advocated as a radical means of reforming the criminal classes, practiced by a number of charitable organizations as an aid to the respectable as well as to the 'fallen'.

Bachelors' Ball - The London season included 'private' dances, given by the parents of marriageable girls, and 'public' festivities, organized by associations of like-minded acquaintances: the Bachelors' Ball was among the latter.

Bimetallism - The system of allowing the unrestricted currency of two metals (e.g. gold and silver) at a fixed ratio to each other, as coined money.

Blue Books - Reports or other papers printed by parliament.

Boodle's Club - One of the oldest clubs in London, founded in 1762. Its members were mostly country gentlemen. It acquired an early reputation for high gambling and good food.

Book of Numbers - A pun: the fourth book of the Old Testament, and what amounts to a charge of promiscuity. Lord Goring is as near here as he ever gets to losing his poise and his dandyism.

Buttonhole - Oscar Wilde said, "A really well-made buttonhole [gentleman's floral adornment] is the only link between Art and Nature." Like Lord Goring, Wilde was a fashion leader. Lord Goring certainly seems to be Wilde's Ideal Wilde, as the added stage directions and descriptions make clear.

Claridge's - A fashionable hotel in Brook Street, Mayfair.

County Council - The London County Council was formed in 1889 to gather together the functions of local government in the capital previously discharged by parish 'vestries'.

Drawing Room - The formal presentation of ladies to the Queen and her court took place at a 'Drawing Room'. Lady Markby would have been presenting debutantes to the court.

Terms Used in the Play (continued)

dandy - a man who is much concerned with his dress and appearance.

dowdies - lacking stylishness or neatness; a frump.

En Regal - Correct etiquette.

The Garter - Most Noble Order of the Garter is an order of chivalry, or knighthood; it is the pinnacle of the honours system in the United Kingdom.

Grosvenor Square - Given addresses in the social comedies are always prestigious. In 1892 Grosvenor Square had twenty-two titled tenants out of fifty-one addresses. Residents in 1895 included Lord Randolph Churchill.

heliotrope - a pink-purple tint that is a representation of the color of the heliotrope flower.

Higher Education of Women - The appropriateness of university studies for women was still a matter of dispute.

Hock and Seltzer - White wine and soda-water was a well-known restorative.

Inverness Cape - A cloak or overcoat with cape: stylish.

Ladies' Gallery - A separate Ladies' Gallery, with a grille in front of it, was provided above the Press Gallery in the House of Commons.

Lambeth Conference - The Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops is held about every ten years at Lambeth Palace, London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Lamia-like - In Keat's poem 'Lamia', a serpent, assumes a woman's shape.

lorgnette - a pair of spectacles with a handle, used to hold them in place, rather than fitting over the ears.

Park, The - Hyde Park, a fashionable riding park in the heart of London.

pillory - a device made of wooden or metal erected on a post, with holes for securing the head and hands, used for punishment - related to the stocks.

probity - uprightness in one's dealings; integrity; honesty.

Pump Room - Associated with the spa's social life as much as its medicinal purposes.

Row, The - refers to Savile Row, a shopping street in Central London, famous for its traditional tailoring for men.

Terms Used in the Play (continued)

Second Panama - After the Panama Canal project foundered in 1889, with massive debts and unaccounted for expenditures, a national scandal in France resulted in legal action against the speculators, who were revealed to have involved senators and deputies in the corruption. A series of trials took place in Paris in 1892-3 but one of the principal backers of the scheme, Baron Jaques Reinach, took his life on the day he was to face the court.

salver - a tray, esp. one used for serving food or beverages.

Seeing the Unemployed - A riot in Trafalgar Square in 1886 brought out concern about the unemployed as a group and as a political force.

Canning - George Canning (1770-1827), talented and versatile English statesman and orator.

Suez Canal Shares - The purchase of Suez shares took place in 1875, on Disraeli's initiative.

superciliously - with a sneer; in an uncomplimentary manner.

Tableaux - Tableaux vivants, in which performers (usually amateur) gave a costumed representation of some familiar painting or historical scene, were a popular pastime, often staged for charitable fund-raising events.

Undeserving Poor - The distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was important in Victorian philanthropy.

Voilà Tout - That is all.

Whig - a member of a British political party that was opposed to the Tories.

Woman's Liberal Association - Founded in 1886, it opposed Gladstone in 1892 by supporting the campaign for women's suffrage. Constance Wilde [Oscar's Wife] was a member, and an active campaigner and speaker.

Yellow book - a leading journal of the British 1890s; associated with Aestheticism and Decadence, containing a wide range of literary and artistic genres, poetry, short stories, essays, book illustrations, portraits, and reproductions of paintings.

Yellow Covers - French novels, usually sold in yellow paper wrappers, and by popular belief immoral or improper.

An Ideal Husband

Discussion Questions and Essay Topics

From sparknotes.com

Discussion Questions

- Take a short, humorous example of Wildean banter and explain why it is funny. What literary devices (irony, sarcasm, paradox, etc.) make the joke possible? What, if any, is the joke's insight? How might it function in the larger context of the play? If applicable, also consider the use of facial expressions, gestures, stage movement, and so on.
- Discuss how objects in circulation (letters, etc.) function in the play. What might they suggest about characters, plot structure, etc.? What might they symbolize?
- Compare and contrast the different notions of love proffered by the players, both major and minor. Contextualize these opinions within the larger moral scheme of the play. You may want to isolate two characters or couples for comparison.

Essay Topics

- In Act I, Mrs. Cheveley tells Sir Robert: "Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are." In Act II, Goring tells Sir Robert: "It is always worthwhile asking a question, though it is not always worthwhile answering one." With these quotes in mind, discuss how moments of interrogation function in the play.
- In Act III, Lord Caversham tells Lord Goring that he hates paradox. In what ways does Goring use paradox in his speech? What are the effects of such use?
- Discuss Wilde's techniques of characterization. How does he make use of artwork in drawing the introductory "portraits" of his players? How does he make use of costume? What are the differences in the speech of individual characters? You may choose to focus on two or three characters to make comparisons.
- Discuss how the play constructs Mrs. Cheveley's femininity. For example: why is she described as lamia-like? You may want to consider her dialogue, dialogue about her, her costumes, etc.

Activity Sheet

Reflections on the Performance

Let's use our senses to reflect on the production of *An Ideal Husband* at American Stage Theatre Company

Visually: *scenery, lighting, props, costumes, the physicality of the actors.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affected you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Aurally: *sound effects, vocal quality, diction, theater acoustics.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Texture: *fabric of costumes, scenery, sound, lighting*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Writing Activity

Be a Theatre Critic

A very strong element in the success or failure of a new production is the Theater Critic. Use the following outline to write a review of the American Stage's production of *An Ideal Husband*

Paragraph 1: About the Play – Part I

1. What was the title of the play?
2. Who wrote the play?
3. Which theater company produced it?
4. What was your overall reaction to the play?
5. Give a brief synopsis of the plot of the play.

Paragraph 2: About the Play – Part II

1. What aspects of the production (i.e. sets, costumes, lights, sound, acting) were similar to how you envisioned them? What aspects were different? What aspects would you like to have changed and why?
2. What scenes in the play did you find most/least interesting, entertaining and enjoyable? What about those scenes made you like or dislike them so much?
3. Did the production move too slowly, quickly, or at the right speed?

Paragraph 3: About the Characters/Performers

1. Did any characters touch you personally? Who was your favorite?
2. Were the character's motivations clear? In other words, could you understand what each character wanted?
3. Which actor do you think gave the best performance? What did this actor do that made you think she/he gave the best performance?
4. How did the way the actors used their bodies onstage enhance their performance?

Paragraph 4: About the Set

1. Did the set provide the right environment/atmosphere for the production? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Did the set reflect the themes and style of the play?
3. Were there any interesting details in the set? If so, what?

Paragraph 5: About the Lighting and Sound

1. Did the lighting establish the right mood and atmosphere for the production? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Did the music/sound add to the mood and atmosphere of the production or did it take away from it?

Paragraph 6: About the Costumes

1. Were the costumes appropriate for the mood and style of the production? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Did any of the costumes reflect a character's personality or wealth? What clues did the costumes give about the characters?

Paragraph 7: Conclusion

Would you recommend this production to someone? If so, to whom? If not, why not?

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