

# An Ideal Husband

By Oscar Wilde



**SHAW** THEATRE  
**FESTIVAL** 2010 SEASON

CONNECTIONS  
Shaw Festival  
Study Guide

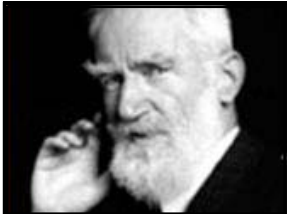
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Life

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## WHAT MAKES SHAW SPECIAL



Festival Theatre



Court House Theatre



Royal George Theatre

# THE SHAW STORY

## MANDATE

The Shaw Festival produces and presents the work of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and playwrights writing anywhere in the world during, or about, the era of Shaw's lifetime.

## VALUES

- The Shaw Festival chooses works for presentation that are challenging, provocative and intelligent.
- Productions engage audiences with clever, insightful, and delightful portraits of the human condition.
- The works chosen often resonate with the wit, social commentary, and topical relevance for which G.B. Shaw himself was well known.
- The Shaw Festival is dedicated to excellence, consistency, and integrity in all its creative and administrative practices.
- The Shaw Festival operates within a fiscally responsible and accountable framework.

## THE SHAW FESTIVAL ATTRIBUTES ITS SUCCESS TO:

**The Ensemble** - their talent, continuity, generosity, and collegiality fuel all of the Festival's efforts

**The Company** - their singular sense of purpose fosters mutual trust, respect, and dedication to the Festival

**The Repertory** - the alternating schedule of performance serves the audience and inspires the company

**The Mandate** - 1856-1950 offers a wealth of material to fascinate and delight, liberating the ensemble to explore complex questions from the safety of the not too distant past while encouraging audiences to re-discover themselves through the lens of historical perspective

**The Shaw Festival is a crucible of progressive and provocative ideas inspired by the brilliance, bravery, humanity, and humour of George Bernard Shaw.**

## OUR THEATRES

The Shaw Festival presents plays in four distinctive theatres. The Festival Theatre with 869 seats is The Shaw's flagship theatre; the historic Court House where The Shaw first began performing seats 327; and the Royal George Theatre, modeled after an Edwardian opera house, holds 328. Our new Studio Theatre has flexible seating and can accommodate approximately 200 seats.

## THE SHAW'S COAT OF ARMS

In 1987, on the occasion of our 25th Anniversary, the Shaw Festival became the second theatre company in the world to be granted a Coat of Arms by the College of Heralds. A large painted sculpture of our Coat of Arms adorns the lobby of the Festival Theatre.



A practical, hands-on resource for the classroom which contains background information for the play and suggested themes for in-class discussions.

Designed by educators and theatre professionals, the themes for discussion can provide further insight into the world of the play both prior to, and/or after attending a performance.

*An Ideal Husband* is recommended for students in grades 8 and higher

This guide was written and compiled by Amanda Tripp and Suzanne Merriam . Additional materials were provided by Joanna Falck, Jackie Maxwell, and Judith Bowden.

Cover: Claire Jullien  
Photo by Shin Sugino

Previews: April 9  
Opens: May 26  
Closes: October 31

## THE PLAYERS

Mr. Barford/Phipps

Mason

Mrs Marchmont

Sir Robert Chiltern

Mr. Montford

Lord Caversham

Lady Gertrude Chiltern

Miss Mabel Chiltern

Vicomte de Nanjac

Mrs Cheveley

Footman/Harold

Lady Jane Barford

James

Viscount Goring

Lady Markby

Countess of Basildon

ANTHONY BEKENN

WADE BOGERT-O'BRIEN

KRISTA COLOSIMO

PATRICK GALLIGAN

JONATHAN GOULD

LORNE KENNEDY

CATHERINE MCGREGOR

MARLA McLEAN

ALI MOMEN

MOYA O'CONNELL

KELLY PENNER

CHERISSA RICHARDS

BEN SANDERS

STEVEN SUTCLIFFE

WENDY THATCHER

JENNY L. WRIGHT

## THE ARTISTIC TEAM

Director

JACKIE MAXWELL

Designer

JUDITH BOWDEN

Lighting Designer

KEVIN LAMOTTE

Original Music/

JOHN GZOWSKI

Sound Design

## SYNOPSIS

When a husband behaves badly, should a wife always stand by her man? The quest for power and ambition finally catches up with a much-admired politician one night at an elegant party when a past misdeed is revealed by a beautiful stranger. The options are clear - public scandal or the loss his trusting wife - but how to choose? Wilde's play about infidelity and life in the political area remains witty and utterly relevant more than a century after it was first performed in 1895.

“...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.”

-George Bernard Shaw comments on the original production of *An Ideal Husband* at the Haymarket Theatre

## The Story

# AN IDEAL HUSBAND

*An Ideal Husband* is one of the most serious of Wilde's social comedies, and contains very strong political overtones, ironically and cynically examining the contemporary political landscape. The play's main focus is the often corrupt sources of great wealth, of which the public is usually ignorant. The characters and circumstances surrounding Sir Robert Chiltern, Mrs Cheveley, and Baron Arnheim all mirror contemporary society and how finances increasingly influence political life. Within this political realm, the play notes how social power relies not on money, but rather on information and knowledge. In the play, secret knowledge allows Mrs Cheveley to hold great power over Sir Robert Chiltern.

The play's action discusses and analyzes conflicts between public and personal morality, and examines the power of self-interest. Although Sir Robert is only honest when it is in his interest, Lady Chiltern, for all her talk of honor and morality, is often hypocritical in her inability to forgive others. The play does not contain a formula for public success, and Wilde maintains a very critical view of society. In the play, Wilde also examines the problematic nature of marriage, and portrays it as corrupt and corrupting. The Chilterns are foolish to try to have an "ideal" marriage based on materialistic values, such as property and high social standing. Wilde suggests a similarity between the absences of morality in their marriage and the lack of morality in the state's political/governing body.

Wilde crafts his characters as works of art, and demonstrates how their culture has taught them to behave with a certain amount of pretense. The play constantly moves toward a more ideal moral standard as the characters struggle with dishonesty, hypocrisy, double moral standards, materialism, and corruption of social and political life. Wilde's enduring message is that love, and not wealth, leads to happiness.

# The Persons of the Play

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 perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride.*

## **LADY CHILTERN**

Wife to Sir Robert Chiltern

*A woman of grave Greek beauty.*

## **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.*

## **MABEL CHILTERN**

Sir Robert Chiltern's sister  
*Perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom 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 MARKBY**

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

## **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.*

## **VICOMTE DE NANJAC**

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

## **LORD CAVERSHAM**

Lord Goring's father  
*An old gentleman wearing the riband and star of the Garter. A fine Whig type.*

## **PHIPPS**

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

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

-Oscar Wilde

## The Playwright



## OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 to wealthy and well-connected parents. He attended Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1875 he won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he soon acquired a reputation for wit, charm, and conversational ease and went on to gain a first class degree. The young Oscar travelled briefly before settling in London, where he established himself amongst fashionable circles as a poet, art critic, and journalist. He became famed for his 'dandy' dress, wearing velvet coats, knee-breeches, and cravats. He proclaimed himself an aesthete, a popular movement of the time which believed in beauty and greater awareness of it through the eyes of the artistic world.

In May 1884 he married Constance Lloyd and they had two sons. Wilde worked as a journalist to support his family, for a while taking over the editorship of the popular magazine *Woman's World*. It was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which first brought Wilde both critical praise and unwanted public attention. First published as a novel in 1891 it was immediately banned by several booksellers.

That same year he met the young aristocrat Lord Alfred Douglas, (Bosie), who was a student at Oxford. By this time Wilde was a practicing homosexual and his marriage was under some strain. He and Douglas became lovers. Wilde's first play *The Duchess of Padua* was produced in New York and in February 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan* opened to an all-star audience in London. The reviews were mixed but Wilde soon followed it up with the highly acclaimed *A Woman of No Importance* which consolidated his reputation as a popular playwright of considerable talent.

Oscar's life was soon overtaken by his passion for Bosie. After Bosie had departed for Egypt following a series of arguments with Wilde, the playwright completed *An Ideal Husband*. In April 1894, Bosie returned to London and the shadow of scandal grew. Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, did not approve of his son's relationship with Wilde. He sent Wilde an accusatory card. Wilde charged Queensberry with criminal libel. The case was tried 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 was taken to Holloway Prison to await trial. Bosie visited him frequently. On the advice of friends, Bosie 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. The jury failed to reach a verdict. Wilde was released on bail pending a second trial. Friends and his wife Constance urged him to leave England immediately. Wilde refused. He was convicted in his second trial and sentenced to two years, hard labor. Bosie deserted him throughout his imprisonment. Constance initiated divorce proceedings but cancelled them in the hope of a restored family life on his release.

So ended Wilde's career. His plays were immediately closed down and would not be produced again in the West End until the next century. Wilde was released in 1897.

Alone and broke he lived in France until his death in 1900. He was 46.

“It’s amazing  
what starts to make  
sense when you’re  
laughing...”

- Jackie Maxwell  
Artistic Director

## Director’s Notes



### JACKIE MAXWELL talks about directing *An Ideal Husband*

There is no doubt that *An Ideal Husband* shines with the brilliant wit we expect from an Oscar Wilde play - in fact Lord Goring, the ultimate dandy with a droll epigram for every occasion, is widely acknowledged to be a close self-portrait of Wilde himself. However, it is through this character that we begin to see a different side of Wilde and his world. The man who claims “to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance” is revealed to be the moral compass of the play when the machinations of the bewitching Mrs Cheveley lead his closest friend to the brink of disaster. Goring is there, the loyal best friend to the Chilterns whose marriage is so severely threatened, urging both flawed husband and intransigent wife to talk to each other, espousing true love as the only hope for their future.

The two sides of Wilde really play out here, as Chiltern and his wife face their demons while a sparky love affair between Goring and Mabel Chiltern ignites. Betrayal and compromise, love and laughter, lies and deceit - we are shown it all. It is delicious and thorny stuff for us to wrestle with, especially when revealed through the prism of a glittering society which can adore at one moment and vilify the next. Wilde experienced all of the above, and I find it very moving to think that this play, which I believe ultimately espouses clemency, forgiveness, and the power of true love, was playing in London as he went through a vicious public trial that showed none of the above, leaving him imprisoned, a virtual outcast, never to write another play again.

*An Ideal Husband* has survived Wilde’s own scandal and has long outlived the memory of most of the political scandals that were so rife when he wrote it. I hardly need explain why I feel the play has maintained its relevance so strongly though its 100-year career - one only has to open the pages of any newspaper virtually any day of the week to see why! In acknowledgement of this, my team of creative designers and I decided that we would not move the play from its original Victorian setting, we would create that world and then just twist it ever so slightly, letting our contemporary sensibilities match what feels in so many ways, a very modern play.

“ I love this play - there is a cheek to it, and it's funny and comic, but it is also interesting because there is a quite deep underbelly. I wanted to create a space with that same wit and cheekiness.”

- Judith Bowden

## Designer's Notes



### JUDITH BOWDEN talks about designing *An Ideal Husband*

**Q: Can you describe your vision for this production of *An Ideal Husband*?**

**A:** My early discussions with director Jackie Maxwell focused on the fact that Wilde has written a very funny play that contains a dark underbelly. We tossed around ideas of moving the play into a different time period but came to the conclusion that the theme and message of the play is timeless so we left it in the period of the late 1800-early 1900s to provide social content. We decided to include hints of modernity, for example in the costume design, to show the story is as relevant today as it was during it's time.

**Q: What do you find most striking about this story?**

**A:** Wilde is looking at what society forces individuals to do and how to behave. The main character states that he used money to gain power as "it is the tool of his time". Nothing has changed. These issues are still relevant today as we continue to attempt to define and establish the "ideal" man.

**Q: What do you want audience members to know about your design?**

**A:** The set is very large and dark with high gloss and little pinpricks of light to support the idea that there is a dark underbelly below the façade of grandeur and success. The costumes are bright and colourful providing a striking contrast against the dark set. This allows the characters to stand out and creates an intense vibration on the stage. It also helps focus the attention of the audience on the little scenes that occur in the larger world of the play.

The large set creates an atmosphere of a grand and successful home. The opening scene occurs in a large foyer that acts as a meeting ground with people and movement swirling around it. Tensions are created when private conversations are constantly interrupted, drawing attention to the fact that people who live in the public eye have no private life.

The set also has many levels that look sharp, brittle, and unsettling. My idea was to give the audience a sense of a world that is precarious, shifting - where characters are perched on the edge of a precipice, emphasizing the sense that we are in a world of glamour, but what is there to hold onto?



“...Wilde is as much of a moralist as Bernard Shaw but that, instead of presenting the problems of modern society directly, he flits around them, teasing them, declining to grapple with them. His wit... is a flickering, a coruscation, intermittently revealing the upper class of England in a harsh bizarre light.”

- E Bentley - author -  
Playwright as Thinker

## Production History



*You brute! You coward!*  
anonymous artist's illustration

The première of *An Ideal Husband* was 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.

Martin Shaw (Lord Goring) appeared in both the British and US productions. Michael Denison took over Richard Todd's role as Lord Goring in New York. The American première of *An Ideal Husband* was on March 12, 1895, at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, directed by Daniel Frohman.

The Canadian première was at the Regent Theatre, Toronto, in a British touring production by the Cameron Matthews Players. There have been several revivals in Canada, including one previous production at the Shaw Festival in 1995, directed by Duncan McIntosh. The production was remounted in 1996, with a slightly different cast.

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. Cartlidge; and Julianne Moore, Cate Blanchett, Rupert Everett, and Simon Russell Beale in a 1999 version directed by Oliver Parker.

When asked: *What do you think is the chief point the critics have missed in your new play?*, Oscar Wilde replied:

*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 dare not show their 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*)

“...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*

## The World of the Play

### LONDON SOCIETY

#### '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 parlour games, get a meal, and in some clubs, stay overnight. They allowed upper- and upper-middle-class men with modest incomes to spend their time in grand surroundings; the

richer clubs were built by the same architects as the finest country houses of the time, and had the same types of interiors. They also were a convenient retreat for men who wished to get away from their female relations.

#### Grosvenor Square

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.



“Scandals used to lend charm, or at the very least interest, to a man - now they crush him.”

-Mrs Cheveley  
*An Ideal Husband*

## The World of the Play

### POLITICAL CORRUPTION

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 became known as the 'Panama Affair'.

#### THE PANAMA CANAL SCANDAL.

Emile Arton Proposes to Explain the  
Bribery of Deputies.

PARIS, Feb. 25.—At the Seine Assizes to-day was heard the appeal of Emile Arton from the sentence of two years' imprisonment imposed on him for bribery in connection with the Panama Canal scandal.

In the course of the proceedings Arton promised to explain completely the distribution of 2,000,000f. among members of the Chamber of Deputies, who were bribed to support the projects of the canal company. There was much excitement in the Chamber of Deputies when it was learned that Arton proposed to make a full confession of his dealings with certain of the members.

**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.

“... as a rule,  
everybody turns  
out to be  
somebody else”

-Lady Markby  
*An Ideal Husband*



The World of the Play

## PUBLIC FIGURES PRIVATE LIVES

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 publically 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!

## 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’ behaviour.

Let’s look at some possible arguments for and against airing private business

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people have a right to know about those in power over them</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘public interest’ and what the public is interested in are not necessarily the same thing</li> <li>• public figures should not be held to higher standards of personal behavior than rest of society by sensationalist media seeking to sell newspapers</li> <li>• democracy would be better served if newspapers were forced to focus on the policies and public actions of politicians, rather than their personal foibles</li> </ul>

“...you know what your English newspapers are like...think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down ...”

-Mrs Cheveley to Robert Chiltern

## The World of the Play

### PROS cont'd.

- 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.

### CONS cont'd.

- 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

- if investigative journalists are prevented from scrutinizing the private lives of public figures, then corruption and crime will be easier to hide.

#### DISCUSS:

- Just how does a senior civil servant afford a Ferarri, a yacht and a villa in Monaco on his government salary?

- such close press scrutiny actually places public figures under considerable strain, making both poor performance in office and personal problems such as marital breakdown more likely

- 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

#### DISCUSS:

- 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?

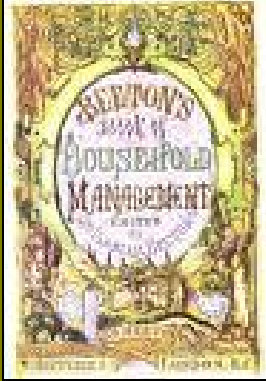
- continual probing into the private lives of public figures harms the functioning of democracy

- 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

- 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

- 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



Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* was first published in 1861 and remained a best-seller for more than 50 years. It contains advice on how to become the perfect housewife.

## The World of the Play

### AN IDEAL VICTORIAN WOMAN 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.

The term 'angel in the house' comes from the title of a popular poem written by Coventry Patmore in which he holds his wife up as an example to all women. The following excerpt gives a sense of what the 'ideal' Victorian woman and male-female relationship were.

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.  
How often flings for nought, and yokes  
Her heart to an icicle or whim,  
Whose each impatient word provokes  
Another, not from her, but him;  
While she, too gentle even to force  
His penitence by kind replies,  
Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
With pardon in her pitying eyes;  
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,  
A comfortable word confers,  
She leans and weeps against his breast,  
And seems to think the sin was hers;  
Or any eye to see her charms,  
At any time, she's still his wife,  
Dearly devoted to his arms;  
She loves with love that cannot tire;  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone.

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." And, can you believe this: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's." What's the deal? Well, 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 lots of unpleasant words about (and between) women in this play. But take a look at their actions. These women are aware of their power over men and they *use* it, whether for love or hate.

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 North America?

# MANNERS for MEN



By Mrs Humphry  
"Madge" of "Truth"

In *Manners for Men* (1897) Mrs Humphry describes the ideal man and provides guidelines for proper conduct in nearly every conceivable circumstance, including: walking down the street, smoking, riding a horse, attending dinner parties, eating at a restaurant, getting married, and, of course, speaking with royalty - *Manners for Men* provides a curious glimpse into society at the turn of the 20th century

## The World of the Play

### 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 need 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.

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? On what do you base your answer to this question?
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 fibre of strength that is the true essence of manliness."

#### HUMOUR AN ESSENTIAL

"He must have a sense of humour, 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!"

## THEATRE DEVICES

Playwright Oscar Wilde has drawn upon many theatrical and comedic devices to create his timeless theatre production. The following list of terms and definitions are examples of various theatre devices and literary techniques that are used in *An Ideal Husband*.

Can you find examples of each of the following in the play?

### Three Plot Analysis:

consists of the following formula: the end of Act One - the main character is drawn in completely to a conflict, during Act Two - the main character is farthest away from their goals, and at the end of Act Three - the story is resolved.

Even though *An Ideal Husband* is written in four acts, does the three plot analysis apply?

### High Comedy:

appeals to the intellect and arouses thoughtful laughter by exhibiting the inconsistencies and incongruities of human nature and by displaying the follies of social manners

### Epigrams:

succinct, witty, paradoxical sayings: for example, Lord Goring says "I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about."

### Aristotle's definition of unities:

the idea that a play should be limited to a specific time, place, and story line. The events of the plot should occur within a twenty-four hour period, should occur within a given geographic locale, and should tell a single story

### Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero:

- a member of the nobility
- has a tragic flaw consisting of a simple mistake or a character flaw which causes them to suffer (i.e. pride or greed)
- undergoes a reversal of fortune (falls from high to low)
- has a downfall
- recognizes his mistakes (in a catharsis or purgation of pity and fear)

Might there be more than one example of a tragic hero/heroine in *An Ideal Husband*?

### Satire:

a comedy that makes fun of people's faults and bad habits; exaggerating people's flaws to comic effect

### Melodramatic Speech:

speech that often repeats, contains reversed word order, and exaggeration

### Setting:

the scenery, properties, or background, used to create the location for a stage play  
How do physical objects bring the past into the present? How does the physical setting of the opening scene create tension between public and private?





“One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.”

### THE QUOTABLE OSCAR WILDE

Right, wrong, or debatable? Talk amongst yourselves ...

“Education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.”

“It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information.”

“One should never listen. To listen is a sign of indifference to one’s hearers.”

“In old days books were written by men of letters and read by the public. Nowadays books are written by the public and read by nobody.”

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

“To be really medieval one should have no body. To be really modern one should have no soul. To be really Greek one should have no clothes.”

“Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”

“If the poor only had profiles there would be no difficulty in solving the problems of poverty.”

“The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves.”

“Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance.”

“Dullness is the coming of age of seriousness.”

“Only shallow people know themselves.”

“One should always be a little improbable.”

“Industry is the root of all ugliness.”

“The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.”

“In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.”

“ All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon. ”

-Sir Robert Chiltern  
*An Ideal Husband*

That's Debatable!

## RIGHT, WRONG or DEBATABLE

Following are some provocative statements made by characters in *An Ideal Husband*. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with each statement and prepare to defend your answer!

**MRS. CHEVELEY:** *Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike.*

**SIR ROBERT:** *[...] Public and private life are different ... They have different laws, and move on different lines.*

**MRS. CHEVELEY:** *[...] I am much stronger than you are. ... The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable.*

**LADY GERTRUDE:** *A person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonorable action may be guilty of it a second time, and should be shunned.*

Agree? Disagree? Why? Should we believe that one whose ambition is so strong that it overrides their moral sense will allow the same thing to happen again? Is youth an excuse? At what age would you stop forgiving?

**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN:** *No one should be entirely judged by their past.*

**LADY CHILTERN:** *[Sadly.] One's past is what one is. It ... is the only way by which people should be judged.*

**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN:** *It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love.*

**LORD GORING:** *Women are not meant to judge us, but ... to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission.*

**LADY CHILTERN:** *You can forget. Men easily forget. And I ... forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now.*

**SIR ROBERT CHILTERN:** *A political life is a noble career!*

## GLOSSARY

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



**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

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

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

**Anglomania** - excessive respect for English customs

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

**superciliously** - with a sneer; in an uncomplimentary manner

**dowdies** - lacking stylishness or neatness; a frump

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

**en règle** - in proper form or order; correct etiquette

**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

**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

**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



**apathy** - demonstrated by an absence of emotional reactions

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

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

**Hock and Seltzer** - white wine and soda-water —a well-known restorative

**Inverness cape** - a cloak or overcoat with cape: stylish

## GLOSSARY OF BRITISH TERMS

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

**Adam Room** - a room designed and decorated by brothers Adam, Scottish architects who transformed London architecture and interior decoration in the second half of the 18th century

**Assisted Emigration** - frequently advocated as a radical means of reforming the criminal classes

**Bachelors' Ball** - 'private' dances, given by the parents of marriageable girls, and 'public' festivities, organized by associations of like-minded acquaintances

**Book of Numbers** - a pun: the fourth book of the Old Testament, regarding 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."

**Claridge's** - a fashionable hotel in Brook Street, Mayfair

**County Council** - the London County Council 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'.

**Higher Education of Women** - the appropriateness of university studies for women was still a matter of dispute

**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** - a conference of Anglican bishops held about every ten years at Lambeth Palace, London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury

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

**Pump Room** - associated with the spa's social life as much as its medicinal purposes

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

**Since 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

**Tableaux** - performers (usually amateur) gave a costumed representation of some familiar painting or historical scene, often staged for charitable fund-raising events

**Undeserving Poor** - the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was important in Victorian philanthropy

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

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