

“The Truth Is Rarely Pure and Never Simple”: The Criticism of Society in Works by Oscar Wilde

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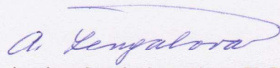
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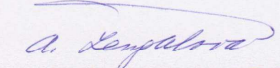
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá sociální kritikou v komediích Oscara Wildea, *Jak je důležité míti Filipa* (1895) a *Ideální manžel* (1895). Práce je zaměřena na konkrétní případy kritiky společnosti pozorovatelné ve hrách a na jejich následný rozbor a vysvětlení. Analýza staví jak na hrách samotných, tak na pozadí doby, ve které se odehrávají. Pro názornější pochopení sociální situace ve Viktoriánské době je zahrnuta i kapitola pojednávající o společnosti této doby a jejích rysech a také samotný život a tvorba autora.

Klíčová slova:

Oscar Wilde, kritika společnosti, viktoriánské období, vyšší vrstva, pokrytectví, přetvářka, morálka, třídní uvědomělost, společenské konvence, manželství, podvod.

ABSTRACT

The thesis is concerned with the social criticism occurring in the comedies by Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895). The thesis focuses on the particular examples of the criticism of society observable in the plays and on their subsequent analysis and clarification. The analysis of the plays is based both on the plays themselves and on the background of the period they take place in. For more vivid understanding of the social situation in the Victorian period, the chapter that deals with the society of that period and its features is included, as well as the chapter that deals with the life and the works of the writer.

Keywords:

Oscar Wilde, criticism of society, Victorian period, upper class, hypocrisy, pretence, morality, class-consciousness, social conventions, marriage, fraud.

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INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde is one of the most acknowledged playwrights of the world as well as the British literature. His situational comedies are ranked between the most popular performances in the theatrical history. At first sight, they celebrate the Victorian upper-class life and habits and therefore the upper-class members were those who attended the plays the most. The success of the plays has endured till our days. But are they really such a light and innocent entertainment for their audience as they seemed to be when performed for the first time?¹ Is their nature really so shallow, doesn't it conceal any undertone?

The situational comedies provide the portrayal of the period of their origin, the Victorian England, as well as they reflect the author's opinion of the social happenings and values distinguished at the time. As Wilde intended, the plays make people laugh, but when they get familiar with the social situation in Britain and Victorian features, values, they suddenly see another layer, the critical one. They see that what Wilde meant to demonstrate by the witty dialogues of his characters, does not correspond to the Victorian reality. He used those dialogues, negation and counter-speeches to criticize the society, to mock them.

Wilde depicts the upper class that can not easily deal with the social change running in Britain. The aristocrats are losing their privileged position as the most powerful and honoured strata of the society. According to Wilde's testimony, they strive to maintain their position, although it is not worthy anymore. He makes fun of their effort to do so. He makes fun of their typical features and qualities, their class-conscious attitude and hypocritical behaviour, the principle of morality that is constantly breached.² He mocks the institutions that were supposed to be stable and base for the society, honesty, marriage, love, political correctness and accountability.³

The thesis is going to discuss the particular examples of social criticism and mockery in Oscar Wilde's plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and subsequently analyze them and explain their meaning hidden behind the

¹ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

² Ibid.

³ David Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1974): 173, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cf96a519-dc35-4795-b052-bfb0b3ad3a25%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=121> (accessed November 29, 2011).

laughter of the audience. The explanation is based on the historical and cultural background of the time. The background as well as Oscar Wilde's biography, works are included in the thesis too, for greater clarity. It is not feasible however to cover all the topics and particular cases of the social criticism in Wilde's plays, the critical remarks are therefore applied to three main topics: the hypocrisy of the Victorian upper-class members, the principle of class-consciousness and its implementation in the situations mentioned in the plays, and the last topic concerns the issue of marriage and the prejudices of the Victorian society connected to it. The thesis discovers the real criticism behind the Wilde's funny storylines. How to interpret what was written, the concrete examples of the behavior of the upper-class society and how to interpret Wilde's critical statements? The thesis aims to prove that the same critical remarks appear in both selected works rather than to compare the plays. Therefore we can assume that Wilde criticized the same social ills and imperfections of the Victorian society in his other situational comedies as well.

1 THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

The Victorian era, 1837 – 1901, is considered as one of the most significant period of the British history. Under the rule of Queen Victoria, the country became the largest and the most powerful empire of the world with its colonies from Africa, to the remotest parts of Asia, Australia, or America.

The beginning of the reign of the queen was marked by the world's first Industrial Revolution that brought considerable changes for the society. The extensive construction of steam-driven factories has begun. On the one hand the new technologies simplified the lives of people, opened new markets and brought money to the country. On the other hand, the poor people worked very hard, they lived in terrible conditions. In this time of many exterior changes, the society also underwent a change.⁴ At the end of the 18th century the society realized the need of encouragement of morality and punishment of immorality spreading in the country. People understood the necessity of typical Victorian virtues for both a good life of individuals and the good life of society.⁵ Those values included to work jolly hard, to prove yourself, self-reliance, to live within someone's income, cleanliness next to godliness, self-respect, to give a hand to someone's neighbour, tremendous pride in someone's country.⁶

1.1 The historical and cultural background

The Victorians were particular about the class and the class membership. There were three classes distinguished in the period, the upper, working and middle class. Especially the aristocrats adhered to the class and they considered the society as rigidly hierarchical. The working class regarded the matter of class as almost impossible to change; it was difficult for them to get higher in the social system. The middle class on the contrary saw the potential to move up. The revolution brought them prosperity and welfare, education, growth of the towns enabled them to get higher social status.⁷ Although the society was

⁴ Eric Evans, "Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837 – 1901," *BBC.co.uk* (March 29, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml (accessed December 9, 2011).

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "From Virtues to Values," in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1996), 5–9, 14–15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁷ John Gardiner, *The Victorians: An Age in Retrospect* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 10–11, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=fo59T5v7EYmJhQe40-ijDA&hl=cs&id=Dipe9nVHV3cC&dq=The+Victorians%3A+An+Age+in+Retrospect&q=upper+class#v=snippet&q=upper%20class&f=false> (accessed April 2, 2012).

class-conscious, the people did not follow it properly.⁸ There was an effort towards the higher social mobility, but it was limited, for there were no rules, positions were unstable.⁹ The hierarchy was based on tradition, not supported by the law.¹⁰

The upper class was represented by the wealthy people that inherited their fortunes and prioritized social standing. Their lives were mostly boring; people suffered from unfulfilled ambition although they lived in luxurious houses and enjoyed the careless lives.¹¹ They also lived under the supervision of the public. They had to obey the social conventions and rules otherwise they would be rejected, maligned. It was indifferent whether the nobleman led an exemplary life or whether he led a secret impermissible life full of vices. Everything was in good order as far as no one knew about it. The society of the Victorian period seemed to be very hypocritical in that sense. What was really important about the person, its moral values, was overlooked. People were judged upon what they pretended to be like rather than what they really were.¹² The aristocrats and wealthy people had to pay attention to a typical routine of the aristocrats as well; they visited approved institutions such as theatres, museums for nobles. They had to observe the decorum prescribed by the society, by the tradition. The aristocrats were particular about the fashion and nobleness, they liked showing off their property and wealth. Therefore, they were keen on organizing consumptive balls and gatherings to show their wonderful houses, rooms and costly art collections.¹³

The second group consisted of the poor lower class people working in factories. The conditions that they were given by the industrialists were tough.¹⁴ The Victorians insisted on speed; they realized that the faster the labourers worked, the more money they made. People were working all day long for low wages. The steam engines became an inestimable source of energy. Since the time, people were no longer dependent on human skills and

⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Household Gods and Goddesses," in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1996), 77.

⁹ Donna Loftus, "The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class," *BBC.co.uk* (February 17, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml (accessed December 10, 2011).

¹⁰ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 157-158.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 180.

power. Although it seemed that the people were unhappy in the factories, they had a job regardless of weather, external conditions. The society became more organized in this time. People knew what was expected from them. If they rejected to work under the given terms, they were fired. Their living conditions were however poor; many people usually occupied one room. When an illness appeared, it spread much easier in these conditions. Health care was unaffordable for the majority of the people, so they often died. What is considered as the worst factor is the labour of the children. The families were in need and every person in the house capable of work was sent to earn money, no matter the age.¹⁵

The middle class formed a connecting link between the upper and working classes. Unlike the upper class, the middle class preferred the individual who gained his standing thanks to his merit. This vision gave the possibility to succeed to many intelligent, competent people who could have brought new ideas into the political and social system. The middle class members introduced a series of reforms concerning the education, social environment, and the market.¹⁶ They also introduced the limitation of the working hours, sanitation and the reform of the health conditions for workers, the law dealing with the issue of housing and also the public education acts.¹⁷

The middle class people were specialized in newly established businesses. They particularly committed themselves in industry and oversea trade connected to the multiple British colonies. They also asserted themselves in the clerical sector. Everything was getting bigger and more complicated at that time, many new offices were opened and they all needed to be administrated properly. The middle class people served at these offices, as lawyers, servants, teachers or even clerks. Some of the middle class people even became more powerful and wealthier than the members of the upper class; they became the eyesore of the aristocracy.¹⁸

¹⁴ Eric Evans, "Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837 – 1901," *BBC.co.uk* (March 29, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml (accessed December 9, 2011).

¹⁵ Bruce Robinson, "All Change in the Victorian Age," *BBC.co.uk* (February 17, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/speed_01.shtml#three (accessed December 9, 2011).

¹⁶ Donna Loftus, "The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class," *BBC.co.uk* (February 17, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml (accessed December 10, 2011).

¹⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "From Virtues to Values," in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1996), 6-7.

¹⁸ Donna Loftus, "The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class," *BBC.co.uk* (February 17, 2011), under "Victorians," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml (accessed December 10, 2011).

2 OSCAR WILDE AND HIS LITERARY INFLUENCE

Oscar Wilde, 1854 – 1900, was an Anglo-Irish playwright, poet and critic of the late 19th century. He was one of the most significant and most rebellious authors in the British literary history.¹⁹

He proclaimed aestheticism, the movement that flourished in the 1880s. Those who professed aestheticism preferred to keep to the past, to what is old and ancient for its emotional value. They expressed their preference by the use of the archaic language and mannered speech, extravagant clothes were often a part of it as well. The followers adhered to the phrase “Art for art’s sake”.²⁰ This meant that art should have no other purpose, such as political, cultural, than artistic; the art should be purely adored.

2.1 The life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde, by his full name Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 16 October 1854. He was born to the prominent family. His father was a surgeon and his mother lived upon writing. His parents were great nationalists, active in national movement.²¹ Wilde was born at a time when Ireland was under the thumb of Britain. The land was ruled by Protestant upper- middle class that admired its British supervisors. Wilde was not an aristocrat and therefore he had an opportunity to see the happenings in Ireland from a different point of view, as an Irish nationalist. This meant a highly ironic attitude towards British supervision and his typically bitter-sweet plays and stories. Although he was proud to be Irish, he had never written in Irish, only in English, French. He wrote solely for English public and solely about the English.²²

Concerning the Wilde’s education he could not have wished for better. He studied at the Trinity College in Dublin and at Magdalen College in Oxford, at two very prominent

¹⁹ The BBC, “Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900),” The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

²⁰ Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer and Daniel Hahn, eds., “Aesthetic movement,” *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R4433831&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1333607758_11023&trailId=135E6B8B14C&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed November 30, 2011).

²¹ Matthew Kibble, “Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900,” *Literature Online biography*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002272&divLevel=0&trailId=135E70C3F05&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed December 12, 2011).

colleges of his time. Oxford offered him to develop his potential and literary abilities.²³ He was very gifted for languages, he studied Greek classic, Pre-Raphaelites; he became involved in the aesthetic movement. He was very famous at the university at that time for his clever mind and well-behaved manners.²⁴ After the graduation he moved to the centre of living, to London, where he initiated his career as a literary man.²⁵

Regarding Wilde's literary production, his first publication of poetry came out in 1881.²⁶ After that, Wilde was rejected by the publishers and his poems were found too immoral and tortuous. However, he had no intention to change the nature of his poems, so he published them at his own expenses. He produced both poetry and prose. He even wrote fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). In 1891 he published his masterpiece and the only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.²⁷

What is peculiar to him is his excellence in writing of plays, especially the comedies. *Lady Windermere Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *Salomé* (1896) gained the unusual popularity, especially of the upper class although that class became a motive for his plays. Wilde mocked their characters and behaviour in his plays by the help of witty dialogues and word puns, people laughed and did not realize they were laughing at their own dealings.²⁸

Wilde resulted from his own life tragedies and dramas when writing. He married Constance Lloyd in 1884. They had two sons together Cyril and Vyvyan. Surprisingly for his wife, in 1891 Wilde started to keep company with a man, Lord Alfred Douglas, alias Bosie. Wilde was at the peak of his fame when the scandal dashed all his hopes. The father

²² Mícheál ua Séaghda, "Irish Literature: Oscar Wilde and James Joyce," in *The Story of Ireland: A Bridge between Celtic and Modern, America and Europe* (Prague: Nakladatelství Bridge, Bridge Polska, 2007), 27–29.

²³ The BBC, "Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)," The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

²⁴ Matthew Kibble, "Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900," *Literature Online biography*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002272&divLevel=0&trailId=135E70C3F05&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed December 12, 2011).

²⁵ The BBC, "Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)," The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Matthew Kibble, "Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900," *Literature Online biography*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002272&divLevel=0&trailId=135E70C3F05&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed December 12, 2011).

²⁸ The BBC, "Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)," The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

of his lover, the Marquis of Queensberry, publicly denounced Wilde for being homosexual and pervert.²⁹ The homosexuality was scorned in the period, it was even crime.³⁰ Wilde left the country for France but he was arrested and tried for immorality and indecency. During the trial the particularities of his personal life were unfortunately uncovered.³¹ All his fame and glory was gone, his plays were forbidden.³² He was sentenced to hard labour. After his release, Wilde's health condition was bad and his psyche was broken as well.³³ He left Britain and lived in Paris at the expense of his friends. He died abandoned and almost forgotten on 30 November 1900 at the age of 45 of cerebral meningitis.³⁴

He would be probably pleased to hear that his plays were performed again although the scandal associated with his name was difficult to forget. There were many critical works researching the Wilde's works, some of them were positive, some were negative. Richard Ellmann published the work "Oscar Wilde" that aimed to set right all the previous works dealing with the personage of Wilde. Ellmann presents Wilde not only as an aesthetic and revolting decadent, but as a critic of society as well. Wilde gave evidence about the Victorian time and its ills. But there is always a question among the critics to what extent Wilde's evidence is true and to what extent it is influenced by Wilde's imagination.³⁵

No matter how great the dislike of Wilde was or is in the circle of literary critics, he became an inseparable part of the awareness of the literary world. Wilde's works form a valuable part of every prominent library in the world.³⁶

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The National Archives, "Trials of Oscar Wilde," *Nationalarchives.gov.uk*, under "Oscar Wilde," http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=41 (accessed January 29, 2012).

³¹ The BBC, "Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)," The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

³² Matthew Kibble, "Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900," *Literature Online biography*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002272&divLevel=0&trailId=135E70C3F05&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed December 12, 2011).

³³ The BBC, "Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)," The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilde_oscar.shtml (accessed December 11, 2011).

³⁴ Matthew Kibble, "Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900," *Literature Online biography*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000), http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002272&divLevel=0&trailId=135E70C3F05&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (accessed December 12, 2011).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

3 WILDE'S CRITICISM OF THE VICORIAN SOCIETY

Concerning the well known society comedies by Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and others, they might be seen basically in two different ways, as Jacqueline Fromonot claims in her article. From the beginning of the reading, it may remind us of the description of the joyful life of British aristocracy. But later, when the reader gets deeper into the reading and when he understands the connection between the period of the origin of the plays and the social situation in the country, he suddenly discovers the new sphere of the plays - the critical one.³⁷

Wilde, born in Ireland, educated in England, had a very clear idea of Britain and its Victorian inhabitants and their manners. On the one hand, he enjoyed being glorified for his works and plays by British people that recognized him because of his Oxford education. On the other hand, he perceived his origins and that he did not fully fit in the British society. This allowed him to criticize them, for he felt the difference between them, the British and their values.³⁸

Wilde's plays were very popular; he successfully used the scenes that were highly appreciated by the society. He employed the consuming scene decorations and setting of tea lounges, luxurious balls and high-level social gatherings. The Victorians loved these scenes for they loved organizing the balls and celebrations, they loved showing off their spectacular residences. The audience also favoured that the plays ended well, the villains were punished and all the iniquities were forgiven. Those who have lost their right way found it again, for the joy of the society and their loved ones. Everyone knew the comedies, everyone who meant something in the upper-class society.³⁹

But Oscar Wilde did not intent to fight for the attention of his audience. In fact he aimed to put them down. In order to do so, he wrote the conversational plays based on dialogues and discussions of the main characters. The conversations conceal the criticism of the society and its manners. They are so witty and entertaining because the characters use the counter-speeches and contradictions. They say one thing, one claim, and

³⁷ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=citref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

subsequently they negate it by saying something else. Or they say some claim that is clearly untrue, clearly silly and unrealistic. The negation as such is then the main element Wilde uses to criticize the society.⁴⁰

Wilde chooses the higher class society for the criticism. The class is known for its class conscious attitude towards the rest of the society and they have also prejudices against those who do not reach their level. They prefer to be in touch with people of their social standing, with the people of good reputation. However, during the 19th century the society of Wilde's temporaries passes through the change – through the loosening of the social rules and class division. The upper class is hit probably the most, in a negative way. They loose their unique position; they loose their status of servants' holders. They would like to return to the past, they at least pretend that nothing happened, but the change that was once started can not be stopped anymore.⁴¹

The higher-class people apparently understand the society as a certain restricted space. They adjudicate who is allowed to be “in” the society and who is condemned to stay “out”. They, as well as the characters of Wilde's plays, complain about the society replete with the people of various social standing or class; the society that has become mixed and doubtful.⁴²

Wilde also adverts to a hunt for property and wealth that was symptomatic for the higher class. This is pointing to the fact the more people have, the more they want. The author alludes to other features of the aristocracy as well, to the popularity of inaction and passivity. The members of the class are expected to maintain certain appropriateness and imperiousness – they sit on their luxurious sofas and present their majesty and grandeur.⁴³

When the plays were introduced for the first time, they were considered as the light comedies and entertainment for the Victorian society. But exactly as Wilde intended, the plays were not light at all. Wilde used the creativity, richness of different styles to attack social norms. Every character evokes some kind of comedy, they make people laugh. Even the innocent Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest* has her own sense of humour. She speaks seriously, she means it but the result, that readers face, is just funny. Oscar Wilde managed to force the audience to laugh at themselves through showing their own ills and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

offences in his plays. He managed to ridicule the aristocracy and even to take a bow for what he delightedly did.⁴⁴

3.1 The genre of the selected works

Concerning the genre of the selected plays by Oscar Wilde it is quite demanding to categorize them accurately. The plays can be included in the several types of the comedy, namely the comedy of manners, the farce comedy and satire comedy.

Comedy is a fictional piece of literary work whose primary aim is to engage and amuse. The audience is made to feel sure that the action ends up well eventually and that nothing wrong happens to the protagonists. Although the comedy is usually associated with the stage performance, motion picture or television drama, it might be employed in prose fiction and narrative poetry as well. It generally covers several types of comedies. The **comedy of manners** is concerned with the relations and intrigues of upper-class members of a society. Its comic character is based on witty dialogues and on repartees which are the witty conversational give-and-takes. These repartees lead to the verbal match between the participants and also to the violation of norm and rules that are highly valued in the society. **Farce comedy** is intended to provoke its audience to laughter. It employs exaggerated and caricatured characters that find themselves in a ridiculous and improbable situation. Farce usually plays upon sexual mix-ups, humour, horseplay, or, as it is in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, brisk and witty dialogues.⁴⁵ **Satire comedy** displays a decadence of individuals, institutions or the whole societies in a ridiculous and mocking way. The tone of satire may vary from mild amusement to violent outrage.⁴⁶ These comedy types blend together throughout the plays and they together constitute their genre, the genre that Oscar Wilde used in his society comedies.

3.2 The selection of Wilde's works for the analysis

The thesis concentrates on Wilde's most favourite society comedies *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*. The plays depict very successfully the Victorian

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 54-56.

⁴⁶ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008), 299.

society and its habits, as well as the sins and abuses of the Wilde's contemporaries. Therefore, the plays serve as a suitable source of Wilde's social criticism that can be observed at several levels and in various situations.

3.2.1 The Importance of Being Earnest

This part of the thesis deals with the analysis of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered to be Wilde's best dramatic work. It deals with the phenomenon of morality in different ways. The comedy covers all the forms of behaviour and manners Oscar Wilde was particularly upset about in the society. He describes the world where all the certainties are breaking down; all the social rules and regulation are changing. What was once set about the marriage, education, love is coming through the change.⁴⁷

The Importance of Being Earnest has the features of the farce as well. The farce and the absurd situation are used to make a certain distance between what the audience sees and what is hidden by it. The characters are all somehow bad, ill and they try hard to satisfy their needs, to get what they really desire. But it is difficult to be angry with them. The characters do not say anybody what to do, they do not give advice as such. The play rarely slips over to the attitudes of recommendation. Wilde just displays the habits of the society.⁴⁸

Wilde was dependant on the profits of his plays. Therefore he did not meant his social attack to be obvious, for he would put off his audience. He managed to sneer at the Victorian habits while gaining quite a nice fortune. Many scholars have been curious why the plays by Wilde were so popular. The Victorians were either not aware of the real nature of the plays or they ignored it voluntarily.⁴⁹

In the first place the analysis is concerned with the research of the criticism relating to the topic of hypocrisy and pretending to be someone else than who the characters actually are. Another part describes the criticism of Victorian class-consciousness, their endeavour

⁴⁷ David Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1974): 173, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cf96a519-dc35-4795-b052-bfb0b3ad3a25%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=121> (accessed November 29, 2011).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Brigitte Bastiat, "The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde: Conformity and Resistance in Victorian Society," *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, no. 72 (October 2010): 53-63, 7, 291,

to be in touch with mighty, wealthy people of a high social standing. It is connected to the retention of the Victorian decorum and obeying the social norm and rules of the society as well. The last part relates to the issue of marriages and attitudes of the Victorian men towards women. Oscar Wilde however pointed at many other problems in the society including the arrogance of the upper-class members and their prejudices towards the lower-class.

3.2.1.1 Hypocrisy

The title of the play itself has a hypocritical effect upon the readers. It foreshadows the earnest and honest behaviour of the main character, but the truth is quite the opposite. Earnest is dishonest and untruthful higher society member that pretends to be someone else for the pure pleasure. Oscar Wilde makes fun of the Victorian seriousness, respectability, one of the typical values of the society that was highly supported in the period.⁵⁰ Moreover, although he has two identities, one of them fictitious, it shows up that he does not know who he really is. Wilde points thus at the troubles and miseries of the human identity. We can observe it by the end of the play when Jack Worthing asks Lady Bracknell about his origin.⁵¹ He has money, wealth, everything that people would desire but he does not really know his origin. He does not know where he belongs; he suffers the most disagreeable uncertainty of all, uncertainty of identity.⁵²

The most apparent demonstration of the Victorian hypocrisy can be seen in the characters of Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing. They have both created the fictional characters to help them escape from their casual roles, from the social conventions they do not approve. They do this secretly, they can not afford to be revealed, and there is too much at stake. Their successful original lives might be endangered. When the society learns

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/845282800/13557A219524914D406/1?accountid=15518> (accessed February 26, 2012).

⁵⁰ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Household Gods and Goddesses," in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1996), 77-78.

⁵¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 147-148,

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁵² David Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce The Importance of Being Earnest," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1974): 173, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cf96a519-dc35-4795-b052-bfb0b3ad3a25%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=121> (accessed November 29, 2011).

about their pretences and double lives, they will exclude them.⁵³ Jack and Algernon do not respect the social norms; they differ from the rest of the society. In addition, the hypocrisy and pretences were regarded as the most horrible sin in the society of the Victorian Period.⁵⁴

Jack employs the different names for a simple reason. In the country, he is expected to behave in a certain way, elevated way, and above all morally because he is a guardian of a gentle lady, Cecily. But in the town, he wants to enjoy the life and have a good time. So he created his younger problematic brother Earnest whom he meets from time to time in London. It seems to be quite an absurd idea to call someone who hides his real identity for a pure pleasure Earnest, by the name which signifies honesty, earnestness. Jack considers his reasons for a fictional name simple and easily understandable. But Algy is not fully convinced, that Earnest's true is so simple, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."⁵⁵

Algernon however similarly created a new name for pretending to be someone else in the town and in the country – he calls it bunburyism. He thought up his poor friend Bunbury that suffers from a very bad health. Therefore, Algy is forced to visit him as often as possible in the country. Algy is bored with his town life and Bunbury enables him to enjoy adventures he would not enjoy as Algernon. Wilde adverts, through these two characters, to the society that is according to him demoralized and immoral. There were strict rules and conventions in the society that had to be obeyed. Jack and Algy are aware of them but they essentially violate them by their pretending to be someone else.⁵⁶

Jack consequently pays dearly for his delusive pretending to be someone else. When he proposes to Gwendolen, she enthusiastically accepts his proposal. She has always wished to marry someone whose name is Earnest, "There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence."⁵⁷ Earnest is happy although he is upset by the notion of the name

⁵³ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁵⁴ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 10-12.

⁵⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 15, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

Earnest. He hypocritically pretends to be someone else. He is aware of the fact that it is not his real name and he realizes that Gwendolen agrees to marry him basically because of that name. There is no sign of love in her acceptance.⁵⁸ Wilde points at the egoistic marriage common in the Victorian upper-class society. The aristocrats often married someone because it was socially convenient; they married for money and for the desirable social standing. Earnest also falls a victim to a materialistic marriage.⁵⁹ The egoistic reason to get married here in the play is the name Earnest and Gwendolen's ideals connected to the name.

All the characters of Wilde's play display hypocrisy in some way, even the gentle Gwendolen. She has created the ideal man whose name has to be Earnest. Every man who does not live up to her expectations, whose name is not Earnest, does not deserve her. She hypocritically requires perfection although she is not a perfect woman. She does herself confess it when responding to Earnest's compliment on her perfection, "I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions."⁶⁰ Cecily, another female character, resembles Gwendolen because she has similarly created the idea of a husband named Earnest. She is lovely, but not perfect to hypocritically require perfection. She is inattentive and naïve pupil. Moreover, both Gwendolen and Cecily accept the offer of their Earnests (John in the country and Algernon in the town) to be christened again, as real Earnests.⁶¹ Wilde shows the foolish manners of the upper-class members, that for their own pleasure let the others act prematurely and wrong. The ladies allow their dears to violate the religious traditions and to let them be christened for the second time, although it is forbidden.

Wilde points throughout his play how the society is actually exposed to the constant hypocrisy that negatively affects their lives and disrupts the human relations. Jack's double life does not affect just Jack himself, but his young ward Cecily suffers as well. Her uncle Jack (Earnest in the town) behaves as it is expected from someone who takes care and responsibility for a young lady, with dignity. Cecily however is not thankful as her uncle

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25-30.

⁵⁹ Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England (Victorian Life and Times)* (Westport: Praeger Publishers Inc., 2007), 27-28.

⁶⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 20, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁶¹ Ibid., 86-92.

deserves. She does not approve his seriousness and no sense of humour and she is, above all, perturbed by his attitude towards his own, though foiled, brother Earnest. Jack has to travel very often to town to pull his brother out of troubles, and also to look brave and responsible, as a perfect gentleman. Cecily would like to meet his brother and rebuts uncle's ideas about his twisted character; she tends to see only the good in others. She has no idea that Uncle Jack is exactly as she desires him to be. He just hypocritically pretends to be as respectable as it is expected. Jack does not take into consideration his influence upon Cecily. He is selfish, he cares of his pleasure and he does not realize he harms her. Wilde presents hypocrisy as an element that decomposes the society and that makes it weaker.⁶²

Wilde criticizes all the manifestations of hypocrisy, but the character of Jack Worthing evokes in the audience the greater feeling of guilt than other characters. His behaviour is not as relaxed as Algernon's. Jack demonstrates his hypocrisy in the clearest way when his country house is visited by Algernon. Algy arrives in the country to explore a real life of Jack (Earnest in the town) and to carry over his lovely ward Cecily. He pretends to be Jack's foolish brother Earnest. He plays his role perfectly believable for the audience. Jack however rejects to play with him, he insists upon his leaving. He is angry that Algernon arrived and interferes with his well-ordered life. Wilde purposely used Jack, the egoistic and pretending character, to complain about the hypocritical pretences of Algernon. Jack is not a right person to lecture someone for not being honest and well-ordered. His own life is based on constant hypocrisy of being someone else at home and in the town. It is exactly the same as Algernon's life, but the life of Jack seems to have a greater influence upon the persons around him, upon Cecily.⁶³

In the last act of the play, Wilde gets back to the typical happy ending of his society comedies, the villains are punished for their bad deeds and deceptive conduct.⁶⁴ Jack and Algernon are all of a sudden exposed by their beloved Gwendolen and Cecily. The women, at first rivals, get together and they feel sorry for one another, "A gross deception has been

⁶² Ibid., 55-57.

⁶³ Ibid., 69-83.

⁶⁴ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21-36, 9-10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

practiced on both of us.”⁶⁵ They are angry with the men and they are not interested in their barren vindication and explanations. Jack and Algernon have both pretended to be someone else and they believed that no one would find out. They laughed at social rules and they finally got punished for it. Their hopes for love are confounded.⁶⁶ Although the ladies are willing to give them the chance eventually, there is still one barrier left, their names. The ladies firmly insist on discharge of their dreams, they want, come what may, their ideal husbands Earnests. Jack promptly explains their intention to be christened that afternoon and the couples happily embrace.⁶⁷ Algernon and Jack will create real Earnest, because so far there was no Earnest at all.⁶⁸

Wilde concludes the play by the last mention of Victorian earnestness. He once more mocks the values of honesty and veracity when pointing at Jack’s discovery. He finds out that his real name truly is Earnest. He was telling the true in the course of the story; although he meant it as a joke, lie. He seemingly pities he has been always telling the truth; he even asks Gwendolen for forgiveness. He realizes after all, “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.”⁶⁹ In essence, he realizes the importance of being the real Earnest, not just pretend to be one.

3.2.1.2 *Class-consciousness and issue of the social conventions*

The phenomenon of class-consciousness and its criticism is profoundly grounded in the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is primarily concerned with the upper-class characters for which the right connections and social standing of their relatives and people around them were very important. Wilde points at the most peculiar display of these tendencies in the first act of the play.

⁶⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 109, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-114.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122-126.

⁶⁸ Brigitte Bastiat, “The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde: Conformity and Resistance in Victorian Society,” *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, no. 72 (October 2010): 53-63, 7, 291, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/845282800/13557A219524914D406/1?accountid=15518> (accessed February 26, 2012).

⁶⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 151-152, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

Lady Augusta does not agree with Earnest Worthing (Jack in the country) and his intention to marry her delicate daughter. She takes care of those who are and who are not good enough to be in her favour. She decides to give Earnest a chance on the ground that he answers, as she expects, her marriage-related questions. Augusta asks, “I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?”⁷⁰ Earnest answers according to his solid knowledge of the social conventions, “I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.”⁷¹ Lady Augusta appreciates his answers and especially his wealth, but the fact he has no relatives, no suitable acquaintances, destroys his hopes. Lady Augusta would not allow her only daughter to marry someone who does not have acceptable relatives of high level, someone who might be a descendant of who-knows-who. The connections are for aristocrats as Lady Bracknell above all. She does not think that being found in a handbag proves any suitable relatives and roots and she regards it as violation of the well-ordered life. Her final advice seems to be unrealizable; Earnest cannot find, out of the blue, some of his relatives or parents. The advice sounds like a hyperbole but Lady Augusta means it.⁷² Wilde makes fun of the whole process of questioning. He belittles the serious situation by the funny, almost silly questions and the same answers. As Jacqueline Fromonot claims the character of Lady Bracknell and its earnestness is therefore ridiculed.⁷³

The relations and family however have a very different value for Algernon, “Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven’t got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.”⁷⁴ Algernon denies the social rules that were accepted in the era, when the relations and their encouragement were highly important. He counts them as useless at that time; he finds it even unfashionable to speak of them.⁷⁵ Algernon is considered to be a perfect gentleman because of the way he behaves;

⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

⁷² Ibid., 35-39.

⁷³ Jacqueline Fromonot, “Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde’s Society Comedies,” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 40, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

he is natural, he is not bound so much by the convention, especially not in his thinking. He is impulsive in love as he proves when falling in love with Cecily after several minutes.⁷⁶

The Victorian aristocrats were, in terms of Wilde's portrayal in the play, also delighted to show off their class membership. Therefore, they displayed their property and wealth. They enjoyed being glorified for their great collections of art and charming manners. They took care of the fashion and their public appearance, even the men in the play are interested in the way they look. Wilde foreshadows the luxury and wealthy the upper class lived in at the very beginning of the play. He depicts the richly and elegantly furnished rooms and saloons of the characters to catch, right from the start, the attention of his wealthy audience.⁷⁷

Concerning the conventions of the upper-class society displayed in the play, Wilde mentions their pomposity. He presents the Victorian aristocrats as very confident, rather arrogant persons that think of themselves a lot. They also consider themselves as the prioritized part of the society. Although they mostly have no reason for that; they had not done anything special to deserve that position.⁷⁸ One of the protagonists Algernon Moncrieff acts as a very confident person; he judges all his faults and imperfections as a wonderful feature of his personality, "I don't play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression. I keep science for Life."⁷⁹ Algernon's selfishness and arrogance are aimed as picture of the Victorian society. Wilde mirrors the typical feature of those who constitute his audience and he lets them laugh at their own conduct.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ David Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce The Importance of Being Earnest," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1974): 173, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cf96a519-dc35-4795-b052-bfb0b3ad3a25%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=121> (accessed November 29, 2011).

⁷⁷ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁷⁸ F. David Roberts, *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 367-371, http://books.google.cz/books?ei=_ehuT8GbNMPP4QSpx6S_Ag&hl=cs&id=cnJKoTmUPTcC&dq=arrogant++victorians&q=nobility#v=snippet&q=nobility&f=false (accessed March 25, 2012).

⁷⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 1, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁸⁰ David Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce The Importance of Being Earnest," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1974): 173, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cf96a519-dc35-4795-b052-bfb0b3ad3a25%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=121> (accessed November 29, 2011).

The class-conscious upper-class members realized very well their social roles and they lived these roles as well as they could. They kept the norms and rules that were assigned to them; they respected the values such as respectability, orderliness, honesty.⁸¹ They knew what the others expected from them because they were constantly observed by other people in public.⁸² Jack Worthing has created the fictional character and he determined the social role of his character as well. Earnest has a wild reputation and he never pays his bills. Jack, although he hypocritically lives double life, is till high-principled upper-class man, he tries to live an earnest life, and once he decided about Earnest's penniless character, he has to carry it on.⁸³

In order to refer to the class-consciousness of the Victorians as well as possible, Oscar Wilde has created the character of Lady Augusta. She embodies the typical aristocrat with her class-conscious and snobbish speeches about the appropriate manners and social standing. Lady Augusta constantly marvels at the Bunbury's poor health. She even suggests that Bunbury should finally decide whether he will die or live. She does not intent to encourage illness of any kind in other persons. She accentuates that to be healthy is the duty of everyone; everyone is expected to be healthy.⁸⁴ Lady Augusta does not approve the manifestations of diversity from the generally accepted manners.

Lady Augusta represents a Victorian aristocrat that takes responsibility for her daughter's future, the choice of the right husband. When she decides, Gwendolen has to submit to her. She is also expected to naturally obey her orders and to fulfill her will. Gwendolen is however upset by her mother's reaction on her engagement. She complains about the fact that parents do not listen to the wishes and desires of their children.⁸⁵ The

⁸¹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Household Gods and Goddesses," in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1996), 3-4, 77-78.

⁸² Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 157-158.

⁸³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Four Other Plays*, (New York: Fine Creative Media, Inc., 2003), 14,

<http://books.google.cz/books?id=YkXKfA23D3wC&pg=PA14&dq=earnest+owes+the+money+to+savoy&hl=en&sa=X&ei=GLdXT9yTBNKM4gT79Oy1Dw&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=earnest%20owes%20the%20money%20to%20savoy&f=false> (accessed March 2, 2012).

⁸⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 22-24, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

statement represents the contrary to what she would really be allowed to say. The Victorian children had to obey their parents and no opposition was tolerated. The parents were not very interested in their opinions and wishes.⁸⁶

Lady Bracknell is a noble lady that supposes she can decide on the happiness of Gwendolen, as well as on the happiness of Algernon, the son of her deceased sister. When she learns about the intension of her nephew to marry Miss Cardew, she desires to know all the circumstances connected to Cecily, her fortune, origin, relatives. Wilde's play is permeated by many concrete examples of class-consciousness and it is obvious that Lady Bracknell is the strongest of all the characters in her devotion to aristocratic tendencies and values. She is highly class-conscious although she herself admits her origin is pretty low. She advantageously married Lord Bracknell. She in fact accidentally came to her position. She does not properly belong to her class, but she learned how to look like she did, she easily adopted the manners and habits of the upper-class.⁸⁷ In the light of her origin she behaves very hypocritically towards the other persons when she judges them because of their low social standing.⁸⁸

3.2.1.3 *Marriage and the position of women in the Victorian society*

The institution of marriage is one of the subjects Oscar Wilde mocks the most in the play. He displays the marriage as materialistic, based on profit such as favourable social standing, fortune, good reputation.⁸⁹ The couples of the time usually married without love and they expected the feelings to come afterwards.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ginger S. Frost, *Victorian Childhoods (Victorian Life and Times)* (Westport: Praeger Publishers Inc., 2009), 25-27,

http://books.google.cz/books?id=41i94L_98pcC&pg=PA22&dq=victorian+children+had+to+obey+their+parents&hl=en&sa=X&ei=C4pYT5LMN8On4gS245HeBA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=victorian%20children%20had%20to%20obey%20their%20parents&f=false (accessed March 8, 2012).

⁸⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 129-134,

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=.../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁸⁸ Brigitte Bastiat, "The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde: Conformity and Resistance in Victorian Society," *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, no. 72 (October 2010): 53-63, 7, 291,

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/845282800/13557A219524914D406/1?accountid=15518> (accessed February 26, 2012).

⁸⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged legislation: writers in the public sphere* (New York: Verso, 2002), 11-12,

Earnest and Algy manifest a very different opinion concerning the marriage proposal. Algy emphasizes the romance of love, but claims that it is highly expected to accept the proposal, there is no sensation and uncertainty that would be romantic about it. Conversely, Earnest is one of the classical romantics that considers the proposal as a very romantic in its nature.⁹¹ Throughout the play, Algernon attempts to distort the image of marriage, full of love and feelings. He says that it is neither romantic nor pleasant. However, the play is ended by three marriages in a row. Wilde uses that kind of ending to impress the audience. He wants them to believe in a hopeful future for the characters.⁹²

The marriage was driven by the wealth and profitability as Wilde pointed at in the play. The parents usually decided on the appropriate partner for their child themselves. When Earnest Worthing (Jack in the country) proposes to Gwendolen, her mother Lady Bracknell disagrees, “When you do become engaged to some one, I or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact.”⁹³ She, the personification of Victorianism, is the one who decides on happiness of her only daughter. Lady Bracknell has her own reasons to disapprove such an alliance, the materialistic reasons, as it was already mentioned in the previous chapter. The social happenings such this one had their strict rules in the Victorian period and all the marriages of the upper class young ladies had to be approved by their parents in better case, otherwise they were forced to marry the man their parents chose for them.⁹⁴

<http://books.google.cz/books?ei=9z9sT6WEBJHAsgam9MmOAg&hl=cs&id=Dt8lTI6Q4h0C&dq=Unacknowledged+Legislation%3A+Writers+in+the+Public+Sphere&q=marriage#v=snippet&q=marriage&f=false> (accessed March 23, 2012).

⁹⁰ Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England (Victorian Life and Times)* (Westport: Praeger Publishers Inc., 2007), 27-28.

⁹¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 6-7, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁹² Dennis J. Spinger, “Profiles and Principles: The Sense of the Absurd in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 49, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?sid=09ea0f36-cadd-408e-878a-847bb49c62bf%40sessionmgr4&vid=1&hid=103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#db=a9h&AN=7727008> (accessed November 29, 2011).

⁹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 31, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁹⁴ Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England (Victorian Life and Times)* (Westport: Praeger, 2011), 35-36.

Lady Bracknell accounts herself as eligible to decide on his marriage, as well as on Gwendolen's marriage. She therefore investigates the appropriateness of Cecily as a suitable wife for him. She is highly content with her origin and relatives. The final decision is however made on the basis of Cecily's great fortune, Lady Bracknell suddenly finds her to be suitable, "Miss Cardew seem to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her."⁹⁵ Although Lady Bracknell is dearly class-conscious, she approves the marriage based on wealth.⁹⁶ Wilde criticizes the marriage based on profit rather than love; he pokes fun at those who put up with the idea of loveless marriage.⁹⁷

3.2.2 An Ideal Husband

The play *An Ideal Husband* is one of the four well-known society comedies by Oscar Wilde. The play deals with the issue of human morality and purity, changeability of the human character and its principles over time.

The analysis of the play focuses on the same main areas of Wilde's criticism as in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. First, the analysis is concerned with the hypocrisy of the Victorian upper-class members and their pretences to be someone else. The second part is related to the principle of class-consciousness and Victorian manners and attitudes towards the society. The last part deals with the issue of marriage and the prejudices of the Victorians connected to it. Certainly, Oscar Wilde pointed at many other problems in the society throughout the play, the analysis however concentrates on the issues that are the most obvious.

3.2.2.1 Hypocrisy

Wilde criticizes the hypocrisy as one of the common signs of the contemporary Victorian society. The Victorians disapproved any manifestation of the hypocritical behaviour; they

⁹⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 132, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129-134.

⁹⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged legislation: writers in the public sphere* (New York: Verso, 2002), 11-12, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=9z9sT6WEBJHsgam9MmOAg&hl=cs&id=Dt8lTI6Q4h0C&dq=Unacknowledged+Legislation%3A+Writers+in+the+Public+Sphere&q=marriage#v=snippet&q=marriage&f=false> (accessed March 23, 2012).

considered it as one of the most terrible guilt of the time.⁹⁸ The characters of the play demonstrate their hypocrisy not only towards other people but even towards themselves, as in the case of Lady and Sir Chiltern.

In order to set the scene convincingly, Wilde employed the real-life happening as an inspiration. The selling of the secret of the British government rewarded by the career growth became the actual wrong-doing of the main character of the play.⁹⁹ The most distinctive display of hypocritical behaviour is related to the character of Sir Robert Chiltern. He represents the upper class member that naturally evokes respect and confidence in others. When treacherous Mrs. Cheveley convinces him to support a doubtful Argentine scheme in the House of Commons he is offended. He is an English gentleman who would not misuse his power and influence, especially when he is promised money for that. Sir Robert is a man of strong moral principles; he embodies the Victorian seriousness and honesty. Therefore, he rejects to help Mrs. Cheveley. When she can not gain her point amicably, she blames him for the crime he committed. He supposedly sold a Cabinet secret on the stock exchange. Sir Roberts's confidence is suddenly undermined. He realizes that his past is going to ruin him, he offers Mrs. Cheveley a money, but she refuses, "Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past."¹⁰⁰ Wilde demonstrates that the bad deeds and hypocrisy have to be punished one day. Sir Chiltern thinks it is not fair to lose everything he gained by working so hard and diligently. He no longer identifies with his past, he is changed now and he refuses to pay for his stupid faults. He was young and ambitious and when he got a chance to succeed, he took advantage of it.¹⁰¹

The hypocrisy of Sir Chiltern is consequently punished; his pretences have a negative impact on his beloved wife. Lady Chilterns, perfect and virtuous, can not understand why her honest husband agrees to meet Mrs. Cheveley's wishes concerning the troubled

⁹⁸ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 10-12.

⁹⁹ Heather Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2010), 168-170.
http://books.google.cz/books?id=C5L0YVQeSw8C&pg=PA169&dq=an+ideal+husband+politics&hl=en&sa=X&ei=oA1vT_KkDOHi4QSHn8zAAg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=an%20ideal%20husband%20politics&f=false (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹⁰⁰ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 43,
http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 65-77.

scheme. Sir Chiltern cannot tell her the truth, she would not accept the fact he built up his life on fraud. She married him for his qualities, she married an ideal husband. She would not cope with the fact he is one of the dishonest men:

I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their lives --- men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame --- oh! don't tell me you are such as they are! Robert, is there in your life any secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once, that ---¹⁰²

She is afraid to even think of any scandalous secret of her husband. Lady Chiltern seems to be perfect; she seems to have a right to be firm, but as it turns up later, she also has the faults, she sins.¹⁰³ Wilde mocks the Victorian desire for purity. He created the characters that are expected to be pure and honest, true Victorians, but in fact they are the very opposite of what they desire to be.

When Lady Chiltern finds out that her worries are true, her world, based on purity and perfection, is breaking down.¹⁰⁴ Her husband built up their happiness and wealth on a fraud. She feels deceived, even their relationship was built on fraud. She loved him so much for what he seemed to be, "The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and goodness more real because you lived."¹⁰⁵ And now, she can never trust him again.¹⁰⁶ His hypocrisy ruined his life; he got punished for the sins of his youth after all. Wilde demonstrates through Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert the ideal of Victorian marriage. Lady Chiltern represents the perfect wife, every man should desire and her loving and caring husband her exact match. But what seems to be perfection from the outside is highly distorted from the inside. Wilde considered the marriages contracted in his time immoral, based on profit rather than true feelings.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ibid., 58.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 53-61.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Dellamora, "Oscar Wilde, social purity, and An Ideal Husband," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 117, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 114-117.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged legislation: writers in the public sphere* (New York: Verso, 2002), 11-12,

Sir Robert is devastated; he knew that his wife would not understand why he cheated, but he is shocked that she cast him away. He believed in her perfect devotion and real love. He eventually makes his point as well; his wife bears the blame for his fraud as well. Lady Chiltern would not love him as much as she did when knowing about his solecism. The men can love the erroneous women, but it does not work vice versa. Men love more and more devotedly, women love just superficially, “A man's love is like that. It is wider, larger, and more human than a woman's.”¹⁰⁸ Sir Robert accuses Lady Chiltern of preventing him from recovering his past and getting rid of it forever. He committed the crime because he loved her, she would not marry him as poor man.¹⁰⁹

Wilde has created the kind of companion to Sir Chiltern, Lord Goring, as well as he did it in *The Importance of Being Earnest* with Jack and Algernon. Lord Goring is a devoted friend of Sir Chiltern that also demonstrates the hypocrisy of the Victorian aristocrats. He is considered as useless for the society, a typical good-for-nothing even for his high-minded father. He is however a man who realizes well the situation in the upper-class, he knows a lot about the life and he enjoys being pigeonholed.¹¹⁰ He, as well as Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, does not approve the social conventions, he wants to differ, and therefore he pretends to be different than he really is. His behaviour and pretences symbolize his own revolt against the society whose he is a part of. He also lives an idle life, that is an exact opposite of the life that is considered as well-ordered by the Victorians.¹¹¹

Mrs. Cheveley, the negative protagonist of the play, has destroyed in one moment the life of the Chiltern and she affected the lives of the persons round them as well. Wilde demonstrates through her character the female desire for prosperity and fortune. She wants

<http://books.google.cz/books?ei=9z9sT6WEBJHasgam9MmOAg&hl=cs&id=Dt8ITI6Q4h0C&dq=Unacknowledged+Legislation%3A+Writers+in+the+Public+Sphere&q=marriage#v=snippet&q=marriage&f=false> (accessed March 23, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 117,

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-25.

¹¹¹ Jacqueline Fromonot, “Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde’s Society Comedies,” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292,

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

to be wealthy because it would give her a possibility to be free, independent.¹¹² She does not approve the Victorian sense of honesty and earnestness. She violates the social rules, openly, when she blackmails Sir Chiltern to get what she wants at any risk.¹¹³

Mrs. Cheveley always represents a confident and strong woman. But when she offers Lord Goring the letter proving the crime of Sir Chiltern in exchange for his consent to marry her, she reveals her feelings. She just pretends to be firm and tough; she pretends to be the same as the rest of the society. In fact she is sensible; she above all needs to be loved.¹¹⁴

In the last act of the play it turns out that Lady Chiltern, the personification of perfection and honesty, the ideal Victorian woman, is not stainless. She is a hypocrite as well. Distracted by her husband's fraud, she wrote a letter to Lord Goring, asking for help. She is ashamed subsequently, but she cannot tell Sir Robert about it, it would suggest she betrayed him with Lord Goring. Sir Chiltern finds the letter and his wife just affirms that she wrote it for him to express her forgiveness, "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude."¹¹⁵ To shelter her husband from disappointment, she lies. She dared to judge her husband for something she does herself. Her perfection is also just pretended.¹¹⁶ She possesses the attribute the society of Victorian period condemned the most, hypocrisy.¹¹⁷

Lady Chiltern eventually forgives her husband, but she supports Sir Robert's decision to retire from his political career. She considers it a punishment for his previous lie.¹¹⁸ Lord

¹¹² Richard Dellamora, "Oscar Wilde, social purity, and *An Ideal Husband*," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

¹¹³ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21-36, 9-10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 150-161, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125-126, 187-194.

¹¹⁷ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 10-12.

¹¹⁸ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 198-200, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

Goring reminds her again of her imperfection when he accuses her of being selfish.¹¹⁹ She prevents her beloved husband from being happy and successful; the same as Mrs. Cheveley tried to do. She supports him in something that destroys his career. Lady Chiltern learns how silly and blind she was, thanks to Goring she learns the importance of forgiveness. She persuades Sir Robert to change his opinion eventually.¹²⁰ Wilde suggests the role of the wives to support their husbands, to forgive their lapses; they are not supposed to judge and criticize their husbands.¹²¹

The hypocrisy also covers criticism of the others for something they do themselves. Wilde adverts to that issue through the gestures and manners of his characters. The upper-class ladies cannot stand Mrs. Cheveley; they denounce her manners, her remarks on the London society and its imperfections. They denounce her not because they find it a lie or offense, they have exactly the same opinion, but because she is not afraid to say it openly. Wilde pokes fun at the aristocrats that criticize the others for the opinions and attitudes they possess themselves.¹²²

3.2.2.2 *Class-consciousness and issue of the social conventions*

The class-conscious tendencies appear throughout the play *Ideal Husband*, as well as in the previously analyzed play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The protagonists of the play are upper-class members of the Victorian society who cared for the right connections and acceptable social standing.

Oscar Wilde takes a use of the scenes that were adored by the Victorian audience right from the start. He aims these typically upper-class settings to catch the attention of the

¹¹⁹ Richard Dellamora, "Oscar Wilde, social purity, and An Ideal Husband," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

¹²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 202-206, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹²¹ Shiv K. Kumar, *British Victorian literature: critical assessments* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002), 481-484, http://books.google.cz/books?ei=VvBtT7u1OqPP4QTPwum_Ag&hl=cs&id=qhm0Ps4jwCQC&dq=victorian+literature&q=ideal+husband#v=snippet&q=ideal%20husband&f=false (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹²² Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 1-3, 15-16, 27-29, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

audience and to satisfy their need of luxury connected to the class they belong to.¹²³ The play takes place, as well as other situational comedies by Wilde, in an ostentatious part of London, in a luxuriously furnished house. The scene depicts a wonderful ball in the house of Lord Chiltern in all its glory.¹²⁴

The Victorians were expected to obey the social rules, the decorum. They were constantly observed by other people and based on their behaviour, they were judged as good or bad. Their public appearance decided on their reputation.¹²⁵ The two ladies in the play discuss their ordinary amusement, they visit these luxurious balls but in fact they are bored. They visit them because it is expected from them to come. They represent typical Victorian ladies with their bored lives and will for nothing more than idleness.¹²⁶ These parties were organized to maintain a little bit longer the fading position of the upper-class. People tried to maintain their status by the help of these luxurious parties and events typical for the upper-class members.¹²⁷ However, as the bored ladies suggest, they themselves do not see the point in visiting the balls anymore.

The same ladies, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, are dying of hunger. They complain about the men, there is no man who would take them for dinner, no man who would care for them, "Men are grossly material, grossly material!"¹²⁸ But in fact, to care for the food, the dinner is grossly material by itself, and those who do not care are elevated above the materialistic world. Vicomte de Nanjac appears nearby and invites a lady for

¹²³ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 1, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹²⁵ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 157-158.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹²⁷ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹²⁸ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 31, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

supper, but she disapprovingly answers, “I never take supper, thank you, Vicomte.”¹²⁹ Subsequently, they agree to go for a dinner when they are accompanied by the men. They consider dinner as an opportunity to be in a company of men, the food signifies a man, affection. They connect the food with the possibility to flirt with other men than their husbands, which would be scorned if being displayed openly.¹³⁰

Wilde’s representative of upper-class member that does not fully approve the social conventions of his time appears both in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*. Lord Goring resembles Algy Moncrieff concerning his attitude towards the social rules and their keeping.¹³¹ Lord Goring is an easygoing higher-class representative, nothing like his own high-principled father. He realizes the social rules; he however violates them by his pretences and his trivialization of the great topics. His father cannot understand his sympathy with London society good-for-nothings. Goring answers in a rather silly way, “I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.”¹³² Wilde indirectly mocks the London society that is exactly the same as described by father of Goring. Lord himself does not defeat his criticism which just enhances Wilde’s mockery.

Lord Goring recalls all to perfect Algernon from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He also considers himself as a perfect example of a gentle, stainless nobleman. He thinks he is better than the other upper class members, “Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.”¹³³ Wilde presents the Victorian lord as a very confident person, as the person who realizes well its social standing. Goring however does not exalt himself over the lower classes, these one he regards in the same way, and they are all the same.¹³⁴ Wilde, by the help of the character of Goring, mirrors the Victorian society and its arrogance; he also uses the untrue claim about the equality of classes to mock the society.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Richard Dellamora, “Oscar Wilde, social purity, and *An Ideal Husband*,” *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

¹³¹ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 12-18, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹³² Ibid., 24.

¹³³ Ibid., 123.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 123-124.

The situation was quite the opposite; the aristocrats did not consider the lower classes as the equal.¹³⁵

Wilde uses the character of Lady Markby to advert to the typical aristocratic Victorian. She embodies, analogous to Lady Bracknell, the Victorian earnestness and respectability. She can seemingly express her opinion of everything. She complains about the House of Commons and the unfortunate effect it produces upon her husband, especially in the way he does not care of her properly since he became politically active. She speaks unfavourably about the education of women, “I think the Lower House by far the greatest blow to a happy married life that there has been since that terrible thing called the Higher Education of Women was invented”.¹³⁶ Lady Markby represents the old-school woman that sees the education as negative aspect of woman’s life. Her opinions almost ridicule the institution of education. Wilde puts her in opposition of woman as Lady Chiltern is. Lady Chiltern is devoted to the support of higher education for women and she is well able to combine the woman’s life, marriage, and education together.¹³⁷ Lady Markby says she was brought up not to care about the civil stuff and not to care about anything else than the household.¹³⁸ The change of time changed the view of women of the convention related to the female education.

Lady Markby represents quite the opposite opinion on social conventions than what is expected from upper-class class-conscious lady. When she introduces Mrs. Cheveley, she admits she does not know properly where she comes from, “Families are so mixed nowadays.”¹³⁹ Wilde points at the upper-class society that becomes mixed, the society that

¹³⁵ F. David Roberts, *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 367-371, http://books.google.cz/books?ei=_ehuT8GbNMPP4QSp6S_Ag&hl=cs&id=cnJKoTmUPTcC&dq=arrogant++victorians&q=nobility#v=snippet&q=nobility&f=false (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹³⁶ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 103, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹³⁷ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 114-117, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=lpptT-vmH8vZ4QTX45TAaAg&hl=cs&id=L6rKsbWYUeIC&dq=oscar+wilde+pretences&q=female+education#v=snippet&q=female%20education&f=false> (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹³⁸ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 103-105, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

becomes infiltrated by the capable middle-class members. The social circumstances are changing and the aristocrats have to realize the change and accept it.¹⁴⁰

Wilde did not forget to mention the attitude of the aristocrats towards the servants. As it was already mentioned, the upper-class was losing its proper position through the loosening of the social barrier between the classes. They were losing their status of servant holders as well.¹⁴¹ Lady Markby however presents the different attitude when commenting on the terrible habit of her husband towards the servants. She feels sorry he does not convey the political information in their presence and they send them away.¹⁴² The aristocratic position was rather imperative than caring when it came at servants.¹⁴³

Wilde had an innovative vision of politics, rather difficult to enforce. He supported the women's participation in the politics. This meant not only the linkage of male and female idea of politics, but also of the male and female spheres. The women were supposed to stay at home, men on the other side could have participated in public affairs. Wilde's view required the equilibration of their spheres as well as their mutual restriction.¹⁴⁴ Wilde reflects the issue on the character of Mrs. Cheveley. She discusses the pleasure assigned to women with Sir Chiltern. She highlights that the only pleasure that remains for women is the philanthropy or politics. She claims that philanthropy is destined for those who like worrying the others with their presence, who like interfering into the lives of the

¹⁴⁰ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 104-105, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁴³ Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England (Victorian Life and Times)* (Westport: Praeger Publishers Inc., 2007), 23.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Dellamora, "Oscar Wilde, social purity, and *An Ideal Husband*," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

strangers.¹⁴⁵ She prefers the politics, although being active in politics is not intended for the gentle ladies. Their position was rather at home, taking care of family and household.¹⁴⁶

3.2.2.3 *Marriage and the position of women in the Victorian society*

The main criticism of Oscar Wilde concerning the marriage is focused on the immorality of profit-based marriages. He did not approve the marriages that were contracted in order to secure someone's position and fortune. He criticized the Victorians that give up their single lives for money, and that are doomed to live without love and affection. He dissented from the marriage that seemed to be perfect from the outside, but that was corrupted from inside.¹⁴⁷

Wilde uses the marriage of the main characters as an object of his criticism. The marriage of the Chilterns is exactly that immoral and demoralized. Lady Chiltern married Sir Robert because of his reputation and fortune. She married him because he embodied her ideal husband. She refuses to forgive him; Sir Robert killed her idealized imagination of marriage.¹⁴⁸ Her desire for perfection leads to the end of what seems to be a perfect Victorian marriage; it is the idea of morality, purity that eventually destroys it. She does not care for her husband's reason to cheat. She does not consider his affection towards her. She does not differentiate the private and public aspects of Sir Roberts's guilt. She directly associates his performance in their marriage with his political career. When he betrayed his moral principles at work, he basically had to betray their marriage as well.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 11-15, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁴⁶ John Morris, *Exploring Stereotyped Images in Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 1993), 31-32, http://books.google.cz/books?id=hkWy2acYtdQC&pg=PA27&dq=victorian+stereotypes&hl=en&sa=X&ei=UCOAT7ODOcaZhQfT8KCiBw&redir_esc=y#v=snippet&q=woman%20&f=false (accessed April 7, 2012).

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged legislation: writers in the public sphere* (New York: Verso, 2002), 11-12, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=9z9sT6WEBJHagam9MmOAg&hl=cs&id=Dt8ITI6Q4h0C&dq=Unacknowledged+Legislation%3A+Writers+in+the+Public+Sphere&q=marriage#v=snippet&q=marriage&f=false> (accessed March 23, 2012).

¹⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 114-117, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁴⁹ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 114-117, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=lpptT->

Lord Goring holds a perfectly distinctive view concerning the marriage. He does not approve the social conventions and therefore he does not intend to adapt to what is expected from him.¹⁵⁰ He is above all supposed to get married, but he does not consider the marriage as perfect state of being for men. He represents rather the rebellious part of the upper-class, but his rebellion is not as obvious, he just does not rush into the marriage.

Although his opinion on marriage differs from the opinion of the Chilterns, he decides to help them save their marriage. He talks to Lady Chiltern about the life and about the need to forgive. He tries to make her more conciliatory. People do mistakes and therefore they have to be able to forget about them, to give a new opportunity to themselves as well to the others.¹⁵¹ Goring persuades her that her love is more important than her anger, disappointment:

Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself? A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them.¹⁵²

Lady Chiltern believes in his words. Based on her own mistake, she finds out that she is not as honest and pure as she thought. She does not fulfill her role as wife as she is supposed to. She pities her behavior towards her husband, towards the society, she pities her hypocrisy. The realization of her own guilt enables her to forgive her husband and give their marriage a new chance.

Through the character of Lord Goring, Wilde reveals his opinion on woman's role in marriage in order to make the mutual relationship ideal. He subsequently, through the lips

vmH8vZ4QTX45TAAg&hl=cs&id=L6rKsbWYUeIC&dq=oscar+wilde+pretences&q=female+education#v=snippet&q=female%20education&f=false (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹⁵⁰ Jacqueline Fromonot, "Forms, Functions and Figures of Negation in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 72 (October 2010): 21–36, 9–10, 292, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04531770&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹⁵¹ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 87–90, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

of Mrs. Cheveley, points at the man's role in ideal marriage. Mrs. Cheveley points out that women as a gender are very complicated; men can never understand them properly. The only thing they can do for their wives is to adore them and assist them. Even the science, whose devoted fan Sir Chiltern is, can not map the woman's mind and thinking, "Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world."¹⁵³ Wilde gives the advice to the men and women how to make their marriage ideal, how to possibly avoid the interior destruction of their relationship, how to avoid the mistakes the Chilterns did in their marriage

Lord Goring resists the marriage, however he fancies younger sister of Sir Robert, Mabel Chiltern. He continues to wear his mask of hypocrite even when talking to her. He wants Mabel to believe he is worse than he really is.¹⁵⁴ He might therefore prevent her from disappointment when not being the one she wants him to be. Mabel is in love with good-for-nothing Goring. She represents the open-minded new woman of the period. She does not long for ideal husband as Lady Chiltern does; she does not build up her life on unrealistic vision.¹⁵⁵ Mabel advocates the manners and behaviour of Lord Goring, even against his own father and other people who find him useless for the society.¹⁵⁶ Mabel is very optimistic and veracious woman, she represents one of those intellectual women of the century.¹⁵⁷ She says what she thinks, and she is not afraid to comment negatively on the London society when talking to Lord Goring's honourable father.

Mabel differs from other ladies of the play; this is possibly the reason why she attracts Lord Goring so much. She does not pretend to be someone else, she is honest and open, and she hides nothing from him. Her desirable man Lord Goring changes in the course of

¹⁵² Ibid., 203-204.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵⁵ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 114-117, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=lpptT-vmH8vZ4QTX45TAAg&hl=cs&id=L6rKsbWYUeIC&dq=oscar+wilde+pretences&q=female+education#v=snippet&q=female%20education&f=false> (accessed March 25, 2012).

¹⁵⁶ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 4-6, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁵⁷ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 114-117, <http://books.google.cz/books?ei=lpptT-vmH8vZ4QTX45TAAg&hl=cs&id=L6rKsbWYUeIC&dq=oscar+wilde+pretences&q=female+education#v=snippet&q=female%20education&f=false> (accessed March 25, 2012).

the play, to her joy. At first, the critic of the institution of marriage eventually becomes the ideal husband. The husband that Sir Chiltern desired to be but he failed. His endeavour to save his friends Lady and Sir Chiltern, his forgiveness and empathy changed his character and his attitude towards the marriage. He becomes an ideal although he based his reputation on hypocrisy.¹⁵⁸ He asks for Mabel's hand to finish his transformation into a hero. Sir Chiltern disagrees; he supposes that Goring has a love affair with Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Chiltern subsequently explains the situation, reveals her guilt in that misunderstood and changes her husband's mind.¹⁵⁹ Mabel has finally a chance to live a free life, the life that was until recently marked by the moralizing of Lady Chiltern and the hypocrisy of Sir Robert.¹⁶⁰ She will live with Lord Goring not bound by the social conventions that they both do not fully approve.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵⁹ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 206-210, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129718&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1329320822_29574&trailId=134E7333D1D&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=300Kb (accessed January 11, 2012).

¹⁶⁰ Richard Dellamora, "Oscar Wilde, social purity, and *An Ideal Husband*," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 120-138, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198800009?accountid=15518> (accessed February 22, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this bachelor thesis was to analyze the particular examples of the social criticism in the situational comedies by Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895); subsequently to determine their real meaning based on the historical and cultural background of the time and on Oscar Wilde's life. The thesis discovers the real criticism behind the witty storylines as well as it suggests how to interpret the behaviour and comments of the characters. It essentially serves to explain Wilde's quotation, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."¹⁶¹

Oscar Wilde meant the plays to be perceived as a light entertainment for the upper-class society of the Victorian period. Similarly, when a reader gets in touch with the plays for the first time, he/she perceives them as an amusement. The real significance of the dialogues and speeches comes to light when the reader uncovers the reality behind them. What seemed to be light and innocent suddenly changes into the criticism and mockery of the most honoured social strata.

Wilde was dependent on his incomes therefore he could not criticize the society, his contemporaries openly. He was not however afraid to mock the society, he seemingly enjoyed the criticism and the fact that his audience did not notice. Hence, he might be considered as a real social expert of his time, he realized well what he could afford to say, to imply, and what to rather keep.

Three selected topics related to Wilde's criticism were analyzed in the thesis, the hypocrisy of the Victorian upper-class society, the principle of class-consciousness and how it was applied throughout the plays and the issue of marriage and the Victorian society prejudices related to it. Both the plays in fact included the critical remarks of a very similar nature, with regard to these three topics. We can therefore assume that the situational comedies dealt with the criticism of the same or very similar social ills and inadequacies of the Victorian period.

The hypocrisy was considered to be a social sin in the Victorian England and Wilde adverted, through his characters, to that society that is immoral because of the hypocritical

¹⁶¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899; repr., Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996), 15, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000129727&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1330503709_4627&trailId=1352DB4AB84&area=Drama&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=211Kb (accessed January 4, 2012).

behaviour. The upper-class members wished to be moral and pure, but as Wilde mocked at their desire, they failed and they were quite the opposite of what they wished to be. The hypocritical behaviour was presented as an illness that made the society and human relations weaker, more fragile. Wilde also poked fun at the Victorian upper-class self-conscious attitude towards the others. The upper-class members were highly interested in the social circumstances of the persons they got in touch with, their fortune and connections. They were described as very confident for they mostly considered themselves a prioritized part of the society. The last topic, closely related to the principle of class-consciousness, dealt with the issue of marriage and its perception in the Victorian England. The marriage was according to Wilde subordinated to the social conventions. The ladies were expected to marry the man of a certain social standing and of a great fortune and vice versa. The marriage as such, as Wilde pointed at, was based on certain material merit, rather than true love.

Wilde provided the readers with the portrayal of the time as well as with his own opinion of the period he lived in. The question that still endures is whether the Wilde's portrayal is based on the real situation or rather a little bit affected by his attitude towards the Victorian upper-class. He managed however to force the audience to laugh at their own mirrored manners on stage, and they even paid for that mockery. That might be regarded as a punishment Wilde intended for his audience/target of criticism for their guilt.

The playwright offered the double perspective to his audience; the plays might be seen just as a pure entertainment, the criticism is however largely covered in it and offers, if not true, then very interesting description of the Victorian upper-class life.

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