

**T.C.
ISTANBUL AYDIN UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES**



DECONSTRUCTING GENDER IN OSCAR WILDE'S PLAYS

Ph. D. THESIS

Başak ÇÜN

Department of English Language and Literature

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Department of English Language and Literature

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SUPERVISOR: DOÇ. DR. Ferma LEKESİZALIN

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	Unvan- Ad-Soyad	İmza
Danışman	Doç. Dr. Ferma LEKESİZALIN	
Üye (TİK)	Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Öz ÖKTEM	
Üye (TİK)	Prof. Dr. Cemile Günseli İŞÇİ	
Üye	Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Gamze SABANCI UZUN	
Üye	Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Javid ALIYEV	

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Prof. Dr. Ragıp Kutay KARACA
Enstitü Müdürü



DECLARATION

I hereby declare that all information in this thesis document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results, which are not original to this thesis.

Başak ÇÜN





FOREWORD

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Başak CÜN



TABLE OF CONTENT

	<u>Page</u>
FOREWORD	vii
TABLE OF CONTENT	ix
ABSTRACT	xi
ÖZET	xiii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Gender Roles in the Victorian Period: Separate Spheres	2
1.2 Domesticity and the Concept(s) of Womanhood	11
1.3 Women and Marriage	17
1.4 Challenging Separate Spheres	20
1.5 Masculinity in Public, Masculinity at Home	23
1.6 Religion and Gender Roles	27
1.7 Fatherhood	30
1.8 Boys Becoming Men	33
1.9 Social Construction of Gender in Wilde's Plays	36
2. LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN: GENDER CONVENTIONS ON A SLIPPERY ROAD	45
2.1 Morality and Its Impact on the Perception of Gender	46
2.2 Gender as a Social Design: Male over Female	51
2.3 Parents as Directive to Make Children's Genders	58
2.4 Revelation of Gender Constructions via Marriage	61
3. AN IDEAL HUSBAND: WHEN IDEALS COLLAPSE	91
3.1 Social Influence on the Creation of Gender Roles	98
3.2 Impossibly Perfect Gender Expectations	108
3.3 Marriage and Social Customs in Gender Construction	118
3.4 Parent-Child Relationship and Gender	124
3.5 Women and Supposed Inferiority	126
4. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST: COURTSHIPS RIDICULED	133
4.1 Marriage as a Requirement for Gender Performance	136
4.2 "Underrated women" as an Ideological Product	150
4.3 Women's Expectation of Ideal Men, Men's of Ideal Women	159
4.4 Wilde's Pejorative Approach to Morals	170
5. CONCLUSION	177
REFERENCES	185
RESUME	189



OSCAR WILDE'S CHALLENGE TO SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED GENDER ROLES IN HIS SELECTED PLAYS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation attempts to reveal how social construction of gender roles is disrupted in three plays of the prominent late Victorian poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde. As in all social constructs, what seems permanently attached to genders is merely an illusion carried out to regulate people in terms of their individual and collective choices. People are trained from the earliest stages of life to become either women or men, and they are forced to keep on performing the roles imposed upon their genders throughout their lives. As a homosexual himself, Wilde challenges these roles without placing one sex before another. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he destroys all moral balances in order to create a new perception where no strict borders exist to separate the gender traits from one another; hence, neither women nor men are able to fit into the groups of "good" or "bad" in the way Victorian society compels them to. The first chapter issues the constructs of angelic and corrupt women, pointing out the impact of morality on female and male identities. Though being aware of the moral requirements, characters get out of their pre-given roles and forge an environment where it is not possible to define the correct manners of a woman and a man. In the second chapter, I focus on the construct of the perfect husband and the ways through which people, wife being in the first place, feed with this ideal and then face the reality: a man lays out several manners that contradict the beliefs attributed to him as a decent man. Lastly, the third play reveals all the hypocrisy women and men display in order to gain acceptance in marriages. Portrayed as typical Victorian characters, they either deviate from their moral grounds, or trivialize love and courtship, serving to undermine the superficial atmosphere where neither women nor men appear truly dignified. By drawing on these three plays, this study demonstrates that Wilde removes the borders of gender identities and violates the patterns womanhood and manhood are perceived in; therefore, former gender categories lose their credibility and transform into a new, chaotic pattern.

Keywords: *Social Construction, Class Divisions, Gender Roles, Family, Marriage, Deconstruction, Morality*



OSCAR WILDE'İN SEÇİLİ OYUNLARINDA TOPLUM TARAFINDAN YAPILANDIRILMIŞ CİNSİYET ROLLERİNE MEYDAN OKUMASI

ÖZET

Bu tez, önde gelen geç Viktorya dönemi şair ve oyun yazarı Oscar Wilde'ın üç oyununda, cinsiyet kimliklerinin toplumsal yapılandırılmasının nasıl bozulduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tüm toplumsal kurgularda olduğu gibi, cinsiyetlere kalıcı olarak atfedilen tüm davranış kalıpları, yalnızca insanları bireysel ve kolektif tercihleri kapsamında denetleme amacıyla yürütülen ilüzyonlardan ibarettir. Kişiler, yaşamlarının en erken safhalarından itibaren kadın veya erkek olmak üzere eğitilirler, ve cinsiyetlerine dayatılan rolleri hayat boyu sergilemeye devam etmeye zorlanırlar. Kendisi de homoseksüel bir birey olan Wilde, bu rollere, bir cinsiyeti diğerinin üzerinde tutmaksızın meydan okumaktadır. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* ve *The Importance of Being Earnest* isimli oyunlarında, cinsiyet davranışlarını birbirinden ayıracak katı sınırların var olmadığı yeni bir algı yaratmak amacıyla tüm ahlaki dengeleri bozmaktadır; bu sebeple ne kadınlar ne de erkekler Viktorya toplumunun onları olmaya zorladığı şekilde “iyi” veya “kötü” olarak gruplandırılmamaktadır. Birinci bölüm, namuslu ve ahlaksız kadın yapılanmalarını, ahlakın kadın ve erkek kimlikleri üzerindeki etkisine işaret etmek suretiyle ele almaktadır. Karakterler, ahlaki zorunlulukların farkında olmalarına rağmen dayatılmış rollerinin dışına çıkarak, doğru kadın ve erkek hareketlerini tanımlamanın mümkün olmadığı bir ortam yaratmaktadırlar. İkinci bölümde, mükemmel koca yapılanmasına ve karısı başta olmak üzere çevresinin bu ideal ile beslenip, ardından gerçeğe nasıl yüzleştiğine odaklanılmaktadır: erkek, kendisine düzgünlük anlamında atfedilen inançlara ters düşen pek çok davranış sergilemektedir. Üçüncü oyun ise kadın ve erkeklerin evlilik kurumunda kabul görme adına gösterdikleri ikiyüzlülüğü ortaya koymaktadır. Viktorya dönemine özgü şekilde sunulan karakterler, ya ahlaki temellerinden sapmakta, ya da aşk ve birliktelikleri değersizleştirmekte, böylece ne kadın ne de erkeklerin gerçek anlamda haysiyetli olmadığı bu yapmacık atmosferin temelini çürütmeye hizmet etmektedirler. Bu çalışma göstermektedir ki Wilde, üç oyununda da cinsiyet kimliklerinin sınırlarını kaldırmakta, kadınlık ve erkekliğin algılanma düzenini ihlal etmekte, dolayısıyla bilinen cinsiyet kategorileri güvenilirliklerini yitirip yeni, kaotik bir düzene dönüşmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Toplumsal İnşa, Sınıfsal Ayrım, Cinsiyet Roller, Aile, Evlilik, Yapıbozum, Ahlak*



1. INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century England, traditional social boundaries were blurred due to the industrialization, the rise of the market economy, and the resulting class divisions. Not only gender boundaries, but all social relations were affected by these developments. In this period, gender division came to reflect class divisions. The characteristics of the different social statuses began to differ for men and women. 'Womanhood' and 'manhood' took on different meanings and overtones. The new interactions between gender and class led to shifting views about the male and female positions and perceptions in the society. Indeed, social positions were related to the economic and political power in the Victorian society, which was not to be changed easily, yet the shifting mode of economic production redefined male and female positions in the Victorian society and by the same token, the gender roles.

In this thesis, I aim to investigate the shifts in the perceptions of gender roles in three works of the late Victorian author and playwright, Oscar Wilde. My discussion focuses on the ways in which these plays reflect and deconstruct the late Victorian constructions of gender. My central claim is that the common masculine and feminine constructs of the period are gendered under the impact of institutions, politics, morality, and religion. I also claim that the Victorian constructs of gender are intertwined with the class; therefore, in my discussion of gender roles, I will also refer to cultural and institutional constructs of the Victorian social classes and focus on two institutions that are directly related with the gender roles: marriage and family. In the Victorian period, literature about daily life was very much in fashion and it contained reflections, criticisms, and satirical portrayals of cultural and social traditions, conventions, and perceptions. Such literature particularly dealt with the gender issues within the context of marriage and family relations. So, there was considerable literary production that focused on the marriage plot. Apart from the novel, plays that dealt with marriage, family, and male and female roles also came to the forefront. Oscar Wilde is perhaps the most important playwright of the late

Victorian period who produced plays that reflect on, criticize, and satirize the Victorian institutions of marriage, family, and the gender conventions these institutions impose on the individuals. He treats the social and cultural constructs of gender roles in a comedic way through creating fantastic situations and exaggerated characters. Although he adheres with the common ending of the marriage plots, which is the happy ending, he still generates remarkable satire. His satire emerges from the ways in which he represents men's and women's different attitudes towards matrimony and family relations. He shows how these attitudes are shaped by the social and cultural habits and conventions in a comical way by creating extreme situations in daily life scenes that require a questioning of the gender conventions. He, therefore, looks at closely the daily life of the middle and upper classes where much of the reality of the gender conventions are observed. In other words, Wilde shows us that conventional gender constructs are reproduced in the mundane details of the Victorian daily life. So, in his plays, he brings out what goes unnoticed, namely, the ways in which the traditional constructions of gender are reproduced in the daily attitudes, behavior, and language of the individuals. What, therefore, seems to be trivial and insignificant is actually the most important locus where accepted gender conventions are affirmed and repeated. Wilde's significance is not only limited to his satirical representations of the Victorian middle and upper class behaviors and attitudes; it is also about his minute observations as to the shifts that gradually take place in the Victorian attitudes towards the gender roles. In other words, in his plays, he shows us that conventional gender roles are gradually shifting; as the nineteenth century closes, men and women start to define and redefine their roles and their place in the British society. Gender roles were undermined by Oscar Wilde in three of his plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde presents a fluctuating portrayal of gender behaviors where it is not possible to comprehend the gender identities with their believed forms.

1.1 Gender Roles in the Victorian Period: Separate Spheres

The gender role records of Britain in the Victorian period can be interpreted as being under an extensive masculine impact that prioritized men, while at the

same time involving a slow female challenge to the ruling patriarchy. Some shifts in the realm of gender roles took place in educational, social or political terms, but a just allocation of roles and understanding of sexualities did not yet exist when the century ended. Despite some laws were asserting the idea that women and men were equal but they were naturally different, laws were still based on women's reliance upon men. Slight changes did not affect the male role as the public manager of family or his claim to the domestic service he was given in the private sphere. Furthermore, in the Victorian period, sexuality was under the control of religion and social morality. From the 1850s on, prostitution created a moral anxiety.

The accession of Victoria to the throne as a female was, indeed, a conflicting issue for the Victorian society. Female gender had traditionally been assigned the role of weakness and subordination. Women were considered as inferior to their fathers, husbands, even their sons in the private sphere, and to the men who already dominate the public sphere. However, all these institutions were subordinate to the monarchy of an eighteen-year-old female as of 1837. Still, as she referred to in her letter (1870), this woman was strictly holding on to the gender roles her society had espoused:

“The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of "Woman's Rights", with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety... It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different - then let them remain each in their own position”. (Martin, 1901, pp. 69-70)

This statement clearly shows that the Queen was totally against women's rights. Especially in the early Victorian period, gender roles assigned to men and women were the same across different classes; so, women were seen as their subsidiary at home to their husbands, as industrial workers and breadwinners. Supported by various philosophers such as John Ruskin, Auguste Comte, Arthur Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, assignment of different roles led to the formation of “separate spheres” ideology, where men were depicted as the fighters within the corrupt, industrial domain in contrast to the women who were portrayed as the representatives of the “good” and the “moral” in this corrupt world. The construct of gender roles attained a so-called

scientific value with respect to Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory from the 1860s on. From an evolutionary perspective, men stood on a higher scale. John Ruskin (1865) comments on this ideal as such:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision... She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise -wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she many never fail from his side. (part II)

In other words, Ruskin located women and man in separate spheres since they were "naturally" two opposites in terms of their traits. Indeed, the Victorian period was full with the ideal of "great men" with great stories that were issued in the National Portrait Gallery and the Dictionary of National Biography, or literary texts and essays such as *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841) by Thomas Carlyle and *Self-Help* (1859) by Samuel Smiles. Masculinity, with all bravery and endurance it promoted, was an element of commercial value in military campaigns as well. Women were assigned a subordinate position with reference to all the selflessness and loyalty they would show while serving their men. Being a mother, besides a pure virgin, was the ideal construction of women.

In Britain, unequal gender roles diffused into all aspects of life in the nineteenth century. In this regard, John Stuart Mill (1867) stated:

Think what it is to be a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that without any merit or exertion of his own... by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race. . . How early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her forbearance perhaps but no real respect; and how sublime and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels, above all, over the woman whom he honours by admitting her to a partnership of his life. Is it imagined that all this does not pervert the whole manner of existence of the man, both as an individual and as a social being? (p.112)

As seen in Mill's argument, men were under the heavy burden of putting themselves above any female in their lives. The impact of industrialization and urbanization regulated the way this perception of manhood spread in the Victorian period. Within the process, work and business was gendered more

distinctively. While wives were occasionally supporting their husbands in a family business at the beginning of the period, for example, the ideology of separate spheres as work and home was completely implemented during the 1890s. While it was men's main duty to work outside home, it is estimated that only one-third of the total number of women were holding occupations outside home. Military service totally consisted of men, besides their domination in construction, shipping, science, politics, or religion.

In the Victorian period, therefore, the concept of separate spheres leaked into all parts of life, gender roles being the most noteworthy. In the period between 1828 and 1846, political voices regularly announced the necessity of equality, freedom, meritocratic societies and the separation of spheres for women and men. Domestic confinement of women erased the possibility of the middle class women's contribution to the economy. Idealization of wifehood and motherhood was the dominant approach. The Victorian period, with its competitiveness and ferociousness brought about by industrialization, required women to be confined to a space where they would preside over the moral values in a peaceful atmosphere. Home was supposed to be the place where one would avoid "those eager pecuniary speculations" and "that fierce conflict of worldly interests, by which men are so deeply occupied as to be in a manner compelled to stifle their best feelings" (Ellis, 1846, p.8). Female traits such as softness, pureness, affection, compassion, and sympathy existed in order to serve the husbands' and children's needs of safety, which in turn, would support them in the struggles within the industrial society.

As the nineteenth century began, the new political philosophy based on individual rights, meritocracy and dignity became effective and started to challenge the traditional concepts of favoritism, hierarchical social relationships and economic domination. Supporters of the 1832 Reform Act that came from the middle class drew a line between the "moral" middle class people and the "immoral" lower class and upper class. Domesticity marked this line. So, it was regarded as a virtuous trait naturally found in the middle class. On the other hand, some radical groups within the working class denied the middle class assertion about the separation of the public sphere and domesticity. Before the mid-Victorian period, the ideology of caring woman and wife, and man as the

protector had gained power, leading to the way for the working class men in cities to vote through the Constitution Act in 1867. Radical groups generally criticized the “old corruption” under the terms “sexuality” and “gender”. The press depicted women as the saviors who eliminated that “old corruption.” This image of heroism attributed to women reinforced the separate spheres ideology, allocating women to the virtuous side. Domestic life was directly parallel to female virtuousness, especially for the middle class and the upper-class. Meanwhile, some radical groups of women claimed women’s position at home to be a political matter for discussion.

Domesticity also found supporters in the royalty. After George IV’s death in 1830, King William and his royal family circulated the theme of domesticity. Together with the reign of Queen Victoria, the empire was domesticated to the highest degree. Her absolute devotion to her husband Albert, bearing nine children for him, her endless pain upon Albert’s loss, and her sleepless nights while taking care of her sick son, the Prince of Wales, demonstrated the British the family priority no matter who they were. Her acts carried out all aspects of evangelical lifestyle and the morality they demonstrated was a middle-class type rather than an upper-class arrogance. Both middle-class and upper-class women, thus, heard a lot of confirmation on the validation of separate spheres. In the private sphere, they were provided with the chance to be protected, respected, and effective. According to the politicians and the royalty, the domesticity taking over the nation was promoting Britain to a higher rank than the others. How women were treated by the male showed how civilized the British were; this could even be used as a criterion by the colonized groups to see their ability of autonomy. Prior to that, in the eighteenth century, society had been depicting women as evil beings who were prone to temptation and instinctive desires. Now, that image did not prevail and supersede the nation’s respectability anymore.

With regard to gender roles and privileges given to men, things were not much different as far as the working class was concerned. With the Poor Law in 1834, women’s dependency on men for a living became stronger. This law also aimed at managing women’s sexual activities and brought an unequal approach to the sexual activities of women and men. Fathers of illegitimate children were not

held accountable for the children; rather, it was their single mothers who always had to be with the children at any time. These women needed to go and find a place for themselves in workhouses when they could not afford to look after their children because single mothers had to suffer much more than the fathers with respect to God's rules. Men were not possibly put under limitation in sexual terms. Women, who were "shameless and unprincipled" while manipulating men using their sexuality, were required to be condemned by the Poor Law in order not to continue their guilty activities.

The Factory Acts legislated in the 1840s restricted the working hours of women and the jobs they could adopt in this respect. This was a direct interference of the institutional power to the roles of women and men. Many supporters of liberalism followed a way of putting women under the category of "unfree agents", stressing out female inability to take care of their own lives and necessity to get help from governmental units. On the other hand, legislators declared men as "free agents" who could perform their work under harsh conditions if required. This was a motivating power for men. They had been feeling their manhood with respect to being the breadwinner and worker of the house for a long time. Since industrialization brought about the participation of women and also children in workforce, many manufacturers had started viewing them as suitable candidates for their workplaces due to the minimum wages they were paying. Women in manufacturing caused men to feel less manly; in order to regain their position as the protector and breadwinner, hence to be a part of the society in proper terms, they had to send women away from workplaces. In this point, the ideal of domesticity was put by them into effect. Chartists implemented the middle-class concept of separate spheres into their pattern of beliefs as well. They declared that work life, especially in factories, exhausted women and damaged their health. A Chartist poster in 1842 claimed that textile manufacturers "reduced thousands of tender mothers to a worse state than brute beasts" (Kent, 1999, p. 175). Also, A Chartist newspaper, *Northern Star* asked in 1840: "Was it not enough for mothers to leave their infants at home, at five thirty in the morning, and to be exposed to the insolence of some domineering wretch, with only a half hour for breakfast, an hour for dinner, for eleven shillings?" (Clark, 1995, p.236). The idea of staying at home and taking care of

the household, rather than leaving home early in the morning and working at a factory under hard circumstances in addition to their duties at home, was welcomed by many women. A group of Chartist women in Aberdeen, Scotland grumbled: “We find ourselves outworn by toil in keeping our offspring from a premature grave” (Clark, 1995, p.238), and married cotton workers in Lancashire, England complained that they were behaved “worse than their master’s horses” (Clark, 1995, p.238). A woman called Mrs. Wrigley stated: “We are wives – not slaves!” (Clark, 1995, p.238). Chartists argued that just like the middle-class people, working class had the right to apply domesticity. Robert Blakely said in 1839: “I see no reason why working men, whose labor creates every necessary and luxury of life, should be denied the pleasures and comforts of home” (Clark, 1992, p. 73). Women at workplace was a threat to the way men become “real” men in Chartists’ point of view; reminding Friedrich Engels’s argument that industrialization “virtually turned [men] into eunuchs”. They condemned the industrial system for changing husbands into “that crowd of women-men, inverting the order of Nature, and performing a mother’s duties” (Zlotnick, 1998, p.185). William Dodd, an American author, pitied men in 1842 for their “taking care of the house and children, and busily engaging in washing, baking, nursing, and preparing the humble repast for the wife, who is wearing her life away in the factory” (Dodd, 1968, p. 68). Now the husbands’ masculinity was being questioned.

Morality was quite an influential tool used by the Chartist male groups to intimidate the state units for eliminating women from manufacturing. Factories demeaned women, making them immoral, reliant, and self-absorbed. It was impossible for men in the industry to find “moral” girls to marry among these women, because they were being “contaminated” by looseness and did not know the principles of managing a household. A number of working men stated that women “considered unfit even to fulfil the office of menial to the rich, are the only parties whom, ordinarily, the male factory worker has a chance of obtaining as a wife” (Kent, 1999, p. 176). The government, in this respect, needed to take action in order to save women from the perils of industry. If industrialization corrupted family life, there would be strikes that would bring about violence, which, in turn, would threaten the position of the state as a

whole. As Lord Ashley pointed out in 1843, “When the women of a country become brutalized, the country is without hope” (Kent, 1999, p.176). As the Factory Acts functioned to declare, women were supposed to be mothers, not industrial workers. Besides that, political arena was a male sphere. Ultimately, throughout the late Victorian period, the male duty of bringing food home and separate spheres ideology was internalized.

Moreover, it was openly stated in the Reform Act (1832) that women were disqualified from the right to vote. While liberalism was taking down the ultimate power of aristocracy, it was also depriving women of their basic right as citizens: voting. This paradox was resolved by attributing the cause to biological differences between the female and the male. Men had the ability to use reason, take action, combat, act freely, and watch their own profits; women, on the other hand, suited the feminine sphere with their passive, submissive, emotional and selfless manners, all of which were asserted to stem from women’s sexual structure. Considering the female body as sexed, theorists in the Victorian period enforced a certain concept of “femininity” as a social construct. This breakdown in the area of sex and gender enabled a visionary on the purity of women; hence, it was a requirement for them to be taken out of the public sphere and be bound to the male dominance in the private sphere, too. Women were to follow a path parallel to the religious values and morals, while men stood for the material and the degraded. In a period of heavy industrialization, women stood for the ethics; men, on the other hand, operated through wickedness, selfishness and tricky transactions. Women were associated with nature and described as wild and untamed, while men represented cultivated society due to their duty to control and systematize. While women were recognized as reproductive beings, men were given the duty to manage the productive sphere. In both situations, the concept of femininity relied on women’s sexuality. Whichever class they belonged to, women in the Victorian period were exclusively mentioned through their sexual traits and named as “the Sex”. This brought up a new discourse involving two different perspectives regarding women: respected mother and wife, and wicked prostitute. Both parties were largely denied of functioning in political and

economic field. Besides that, the fact that women were labelled as “the Sex” opened the way to women’s sexual harassment.

Traditional perspectives to gender roles excluded women from almost any other roles in society except the domestic ones. As both working-class and middle-class men had implemented the definition of work as a male action within the enactment of the Poor Law and the Factory Acts, the probability of women in work life was detected as a divergence. In 1851, women’s basic occupation was accepted to be motherhood since “the child receives nurture, warmth, affection, admonition, education from a good mother; who, with the child in her arms, is in the eyes of all European nations surrounded by a sanctity which is only expressed in the highest works of art” (Rose, 1992). In 1881, it was officially declared that doing any sort of work at home, from housework to running a family business, was not accepted as profession. The concept of work was redefined within the disappearance of housework from the occupations’ list. Men were paid higher wages than before, so the number of women who attempted to join the workforce got a lot lower than ever before in the history.

The majority of the middle and upper class women whose fathers or husbands earned as much money as to run the household did not even consider working outside the house to earn money. Yet, it was a requirement for the working class women to contribute to the income of the family. For these women, working meant survival. However, due to the imposition of the male ideology as the ultimate breadwinner and the female as the wife whose job was constrained within the limits of the home, work life for women was never supported either by the public or the employers in the factories. A working woman was referred to as a threat for the men in that she would jeopardize their masculinity and ruin their primacy in the households. When women remained far from the industrial work, the identities of their husbands and fathers as powerful, responsible and respected men would be consolidated. Both members of the trade unions and “moral” people of the middle-class were after labeling these women immoral with respect to their rejection in doing housework in private sphere, which a seemingly natural attachment on them. Here, it became possible for these women, who once attempted to be a part of the public sphere, to earn money, to adopt another public identity as a prostitute, who served in return for money.

Indeed, the fact presented here is that the ideology of private and public spheres was seriously nourished by prostitution in their persistence.

Because of the dilemma women went through in this period, only unmarried women tried being a part of the working industry in the 1850s. When married, they quit work and started doing what they were expected to at home. In many instances, wives simply left their jobs. By the 1850s, only single women tended to work in factories; upon marriage, they ceased factory work and took up labor that they could perform at home. Some women were involved in the industrial house work such as laundry, but it took too much time, was exhausting, and paid too little.

1.2 Domesticity and the Concept(s) of Womanhood

Domesticity fed on the ideal that all women should get married and give birth. Marriage was the ultimate rule in the Victorian period; young people were able to marry without obtaining a land or a specific craft as they were earning wages. The public view asserted that if a woman did not wish to marry, especially in the working-class, there was no way that she would make a living. They generally affiliated themselves with men, or got together with single women like themselves and shared the same household, while sharing the expenditures. Women who did not earn an income in the middle-class had to lead a life with the male members of their family until death if they wanted to preserve their reputation in the society. It was such a rare occasion that they could live alone. Indeed, due to the increase in the number of unmarried women in the 1850s, these women set out to be “the problem to be solved, the evil and anomaly to be cured” (cited in Poovey, 1988, p. 1). For W. R. Greg, these “redundant” women (1862) constituted a threat to men with the competitiveness they caused in work arena. Later on, he made another analysis: unmarried women were socially contributors to the act of prostitution and if they were less in number, hence, their “value increased”, men could easily be involved in those “illicit” interactions with corrupt women. These single women had to be conceived as a problem to maintain morality in the society. Greg suggested at this point that these “surplus” women get “remove[d] from the mother country. . . to the colonies” because in the colonies there was need for more women due to the

high number of men. All typical roles attributed to women were found in these statements: a moral woman as mother and wife, and a prostitute.

Women's fundamental domestic duty was the preservation of the moral values. The "angel in the house" was supposed to be virtuous, and deprived of feelings of passion. It was traditionally believed until the eighteenth century that women were endlessly passionate, but were able to turn into non-secular humans with the help of God. After that, the idea of women as lustful beings changed into the notion that they were, indeed, less passionate than men. The concept of woman without passion was constructed within the masculinization process of the industrial revolution and the limiting of women's action in the political arena. Being passionless came out of the alleged female nature, which was inherently moral. This state would provide them with a higher social level than the one previously attributed to them. It transformed the female identity referred to as sexually treacherous, in opposition to the prior idea that they made of sexuality because of the social, cultural and political defects putting them under a fragile position.

The anti-slavery movement of 1823 provided a suitable sphere for the revelation of women's morality and spirituality. Interpreted as a reflection of the humane traits women inherently had, this movement was more a representation of religious values and morals than a political manifesto. Followers of this movement urged women to give in to the "sacred cause" of abolishment for Christ's sake. "Should they, for His sake, actively engage in this labour of Christian love, they cannot fail, whatever be the issue, to inherit 'the blessing of those who are ready to perish', and the richer blessing of Him who declares that even a cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward" (Kent, 1999, p. 186). The movement, considered as a continuation of echoes of female domesticity, had influence on the Victorian constructions of the women's roles without seemingly exceeding the social barriers surrounding it.

In the Victorian period, the construction of women as sexual beings also shifted. Being devoid of sexual passion suggested a life in favor of women who were also expected to have a role in the ideological construction of it. However, physicians in the mid-Victorian period converted the idea of lack of passion from a moral state to a concept made up of biological laws. This new ideal

assigned sexuality to the female just as the traditional one. Women now were sexually weak, which would be a cause for the male to retreat from pursuit. Indeed, on one hand, this new “science of sex” claimed a nonexistence in women’s sexual desire; on the other hand, there was the belief that the female body was already fulfilled with sex. William Acton in his book *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1862) stated that

The majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally . . . Sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all; and even if aroused (which in many cases it can never be) it is very moderate compared with that of the male.

Acton asserted that women’s “indifference to sex was naturally ordained to prevent the male’s vital energies from being overly expended at any one time”. This passionless state promoted by the physicians helped strengthen the puritanism in society, especially among the middle-class people and promoted that dismissing sexuality meant elevating the innocence in sexuality. The public preference was women who had either little or no knowledge about their sexuality and reproductivity. The situation where women were depicted as innocent and pure, in contrast to men who were passionate and horny, established a conversion in the traditional perceptions of genders. Men were hard and venturesome, whereas women were constructed as victims to this venturesome attitude.

The physicians who regarded women as passionless were, at the same time, persistent in the construction of women as beings that were controlled by their reproductive anatomy. A gynecologist named W.W. Bliss commented on the conceptualization of “the Sex” as the “gigantic power and influence of the ovaries over the whole animal economy of woman” (1870, p. 96). Dr. Horatio Storer, a member of the Medico-Chirurgical and Obstetric Societies of Edinburgh, declared that “woman was what she is . . . in health, in character, in her charms, alike of body, mind and soul because of her womb alone” (cited in Kent, 1987, p. 42). Women being referred to as “the Sex” was such public that any traits they exhibited that damaged the constructs of motherhood or wifeness, like seeking their rights politically or struggling for education, was

an implication of being “unsexed”. Women were believed to be managed by their reproductive systems in the Victorian period. Henry Maudsley, a British psychiatrist, mentioned in *Popular Science Monthly* (1874) that “the male organization is one, and female organization another . . . it will not be possible to transform a woman into a man . . . she will retain her special sphere of development and activity determined by the performance of those [reproductive] functions”. Reproduction in women necessitated enough effort to operate; canalizing the energy in other ways would demolish the female anatomical system, which is the sole reason for women’s survival. Women were, as stated before, reproductive bodies, not productive ones, as their childbearing capacities would be diminished otherwise. Due to their way of functioning, scientists concluded that women were not able to face up to the struggle education life or dense intellectual activity would bring. Any intervention with the reproductive development of the female would risk women’s health up to a serious degree, namely, their capacity of childbearing. In order for women to perform their reproductivity properly, they must not proceed on the same route with men. “They cannot choose but to be women; cannot rebel successfully against the tyranny of their organization” (1874, p. 200), Maudsley stated. Hence, women must be deprived of any kind of training which would “unsex” her since “sex is fundamental, lies deeper than culture, cannot be ignored or defied with impunity . . . if the attempt to do so be seriously and persistently made, the result may be a monstrosity – something which having ceased to be woman is not yet man”. Women, who were recognized as sexual bodies regulated by their reproductive aspects, would lose the status as persons if they resisted and challenged their predetermined roles.

Eventually, the Victorian constructions of womanhood involved a dichotomy. A woman was the angel in the house, possessing the moral traits of a mother and a wife, or the corrupt type with all her immorality. The existence of the virtuous, pure middle-class woman image was set against its contrasting image as the wicked. In *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, Acton put forth that being a mother enabled the motivation for female sexual activities; however, men were driven by their natural desires. He argued that “there are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever . . . Many of the

best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel” (cited in Helsinger et al., 1989, p. 62). The moral woman, asking for no sexual arousal, “submits to her husband’s embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved of his attentions”. In some situations where some women expressed “positive loathing for any marital familiarity whatever”, “feeling has been sacrificed to duty, and the wife has endured, with all the self-martyrdom of womanhood, what was almost worse than death”. Some women, “who, either from ignorance or utter want of sympathy . . . not only evince no sexual feeling, but, on the contrary, scruple not to declare their aversion to the least manifestation of it”. Men marrying these women grumbled in Acton’s opinion, “with reason that they are debarred from the privileges of marriage, and that their sexual sufferings are almost greater than they can bear in consequence of being mated to women who think and act in the above-cited instances”. He reminded that being devoid of a comfortable sexual space “might be . . . highly detrimental to the health of the husband,” a problem “ultimately too often ending in impotence” (Acton, 1862, p. 10).

It can be understood from the statements above that Victorians accepted male sexuality and desire as innate masculine features as opposed to female sexuality. For W.R. Greg, men carried the desire of sex inherently and spontaneously in themselves. For Acton, male sexual instincts could be managed but never totally suppressed. A balance between the innocent, moral angel in the house and the male with sexual impulses necessitated a sexual structure that presumed a twofold nature. In this respect, masculinity relied on the duality of maternity and prostitution. In the nineteenth century, masturbation, for example, was conceived as a factor in a huge number of pathologies. In such a case, the only remedy in a social environment dividing sexuality from virtues such as maternity would be constructing another group of women, prostitutes, who would be ready to satisfy the male sexual drive. William Lecky in *History of European Morals* (1869) argued that prostitution existed for a significant realm of sexual safety for the Victorian society. With respect to the prostitute, he stated:

She is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted, and not a few who, in the pride of their untempted chastity, think of her with an indignant shudder, would have known the agony of remorse of despair. On that degraded and ignoble form are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame. (p. 90)

Hence, in Victorian Britain, the official acknowledgement of prostitution functioned as the confirmation of masculinity.

Furthermore, the efforts to construct the binary of moral and immoral and to place prostitution on legitimate grounds via the Contagious Diseases Act were some actions consistent with the ruling Victorian ideology of separate spheres. Moral women stayed within the borders of home, and this place witnessed the sexual relationship between the husband and the wife as a proof of love and reproduction. These supported the female construct of the angel in the house. Public sphere belonged to the immoral women, where she promoted her body for money. The supporters of the Diseases Acts insisted that these two spheres had no relationship in any way. In the Victorian society, prostitutes stood for the duty of tempting men, disruption of morality, and embodiment of disease. These women were considered to take up this “job” with pleasure and covetousness. Women in the private sphere, who could be sexually triggered only when the situation of motherhood was the expectation, would not need to feel nervous due to the existence of this type of women since they were convinced that they would go on seeing the chivalric attitudes of their men towards them. This unjust separation of moral mother-wife and immoral prostitute declared a single type of manhood, whereas there were two views of womanhood. Feminists argued that if there was a single form of masculinity, also one single form of femininity was to exist. They also opposed the idea that the respected angels in houses could have no connection with a nauseous type of human as a prostitute. They defended the fact that two types of women exist was partly due to the traditional values that elevated female ignorance in sexuality. They wanted to undermine that belief, reminding that prostitutes mattered significantly to every women. As Josephine Butler stated: “At the very base of the Acts lies the false and poisonous idea that women (i.e. Ladies) have ‘nothing to do with this question,’ and ought not to hear of it, much less meddle

with it.” Such “propriety and modesty” insisted upon by the ideology of the angel in the house had been “the cause of outrage and destruction to so many of our poorer fellow women. . . . I cannot forget the misery, the injustice and the outrage which have fallen upon women, simply because we stood aside when men felt our presence to be painful” (cited in Kent, 1999, p. 202). Butler referred to the traditional perspectives towards womanhood stressed out by the Contagious Diseases Act. Indeed, in the Victorian period, association of middle-class women with immoral and degraded figures was a common incident. Some feminists even took this association to a personal level. They insisted that the attribution of morality and immorality to women and rendering separate roles in this respect was an illusion. Butler told men: “Sirs, you hold in honour as long as you drag cannot us our sisters in the mire. As you are unjust and cruel to them, you will become unjust and cruel to us” (Kent, 1999, p. 202).

1.3 Women and Marriage

In the Victorian period, marriage was the ultimate goal for most of the English females in the middle and working classes. Although the examples they could come across were all reflections of the harsh lives they were leading, women did not give up this ideal. Traditional gender role constructs had already rendered marriage as the natural path to choose in the course of life. In the early period, average age for marrying was 25.3 for males, and 23.4 for females. In the late Victorian period, these numbers had only slightly increased (Wrigley and Schofield, 1981). Similar to the middle-class women, working class women wished to marry; still, their desire was to attain the higher value marriage would provide them in the eyes of public, a house she would belong to, a husband she would be with, legal sex and children; they did not focus on the experience of being the “angel in the house”, like the middle-class women did.

In terms of the gender roles of working-class men and women, it is possible to say that these people had to live controlled lives, avoid the habits of drinking or gambling, spend their time by remaining far from rough hobbies and activities, be after virginity before marriage and loyalty in marriage, and compensate for their financial needs. They held prudence, pride, concealment of ill luck and getting the best out of things above everything. In this point, the British

reformer Francis Place was known to be as a tough-minded member of the working class who praised self-reliance and prudence as virtues. In his *Autobiography* (1972), he referred to the inexorable impacts which led him, together with his wife, into the internalization of such virtues. Being respected was an internal tendency; it came to mean possessing a proper perception of one's identity, dressing up and physically keeping that respected image.

Many working-class women were unconditionally attracted to the Evangelical belief that women traditionally held a special duty; they were the ones to manage a household, which was the center of moral values and where self-discipline, order and abstinence were being learnt. They were mostly focused on the act of control: controlling their possible deeds, their husbands, how many children they would give birth to, the way these children would be educated, and how much money they would spend for the family expenditures. Parents as virtuous women and men commonly had their children attend Sunday school, where they would "learn the difference between right and wrong", become better boys and girls, and be kept away from misbehavior. According to the reports, before 1914, six million children were attending these schools. They must have executed their roles as women and men throughout their lives in accordance with the teachings they got as children (Laqueur, 1990, p.246).

Quite typically, women were responsible for the housework, food preparation and taking care of their children. It was, however, unclear why they were also responsible of financial management of the household. It was possibly due to the fact that they could manipulate money under hard and limited circumstances. Women in public places, if they had a chance to be at this setting, earned much less than men; in addition, they would not see many possibilities to spread out their wages. As a matter of fact, a psychological cause for women to be in financial charge of the home existed as well. Anna Martin summarizes the condition as such (cited in Perkin, 1989):

The women have a vague dread of being superseded and dethroned. Each of them knows perfectly well that the strength of her position in the home lies in the physical dependence of husband and children upon her, and she is suspicious of anything that would tend to undermine this. The feeling that she is the indispensable centre of her small world is, indeed, the joy and consolation of her life. (p.146)

In other words, Victorian gender perception promoted private sphere as the only place where a woman was able to perform her skills, fulfill herself and feel alive. Under the Common Law, a wife had already been recognized through her husband on legal grounds. If she was earning a wage, the husband was not responsible for supporting her; it was the same for the children. Similar to the upper-class women, even though due to different reasons, working-class women were not governed by the civil law at all. Because of the fact that these women possessed too few or no goods which they would protect, they remained outside the field of law.

In order for a family to enable certain living standards, it was not enough to receive an amount of wage. It was also connected to the way family resources were managed, and this was mainly the duty of the wife. The amount of money spent on various subjects, preferences on expenditure such as food or luxury items, and sparing money for rent or gambling. The perfect wife, in this point, was a perfect manager of home affairs. As long as a woman acted, so to say, whimsically, or she had a physical incapableness in terms of regulating the in-house life, the husband would not be able to get over the financial imbalance to arise at home. This meant that a woman was face-to-face with the probability of getting married with someone who could not manage the family's financial process.

It is also known that the Victorian society was rather uncommunicative about the issues of courtship and marriage. Both women and men found it irrelevant to express their emotional lives in the public sphere. For them, people outside their households would regard any disharmony in their relationships as personal deficiency. Even though sexual attraction was an influencing factor, especially in courtships, "love" in marriages was put under written records in complete absence of physicality. Attempts to become respectable women and men caused both the denouncement of sexual marginality and the denouncement of sex on its own. Elizabeth Roberts (1984) revealed that women were seriously anxious and ignorant about sex before getting married. According to one of them, they were just innocent as grave. Sexual intercourse outside marriage was absolutely despised.

The traditional belief that women were the source of patience and support in households spread not only orally but also through publication. *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (1916) documents the means through which women in the Victorian period needed to support their husbands and children, even in the stiffest situations. They had to be full of love, affection and endurance. In *Round About a Pound a Week* (1914), working-class women mentioned their husbands in good terms in spite of the fact that their children visibly constituted all their lives. One woman reported her relationship with her husband as such: “My young man’s that good ter me I feel as if somethink nice ’ad ’appened every time ’e comes in” (“young man” refers to the husband here); for another woman, “E’s all right”; another referred to her alcoholic husband as such: “E’s a good ’un. ’E ain’t never kep’ back me twenty-three bob, but e’s that spiteful Satterday nights I ’as ter keep the children from ’im” (p. 135). Hence, managing a husband and several children in a household necessitated a serious amount of understanding and patience.

1.4 Challenging Separate Spheres

The concepts of marriage and family under the effect of domesticity were strictly based on a romanticized ideal based on love and spiritual equivalence of the female and the male; however, women’s position in the society had to confirm this in legal terms. As previously stated, due to the coverture law, married women had their rights only with reference to their husbands. The known aphorism, “my wife and I are one and I am he” reveals the case where a married woman is only bound to her husband to claim her rights, properties, her life, even her body; all these lied in the existence of her husband.

In the Victorian period, an argument regarding the large number of women in comparison to the number of men in the society took place, convincing the middle-class families that daughters in these families might not find a mate to get married. Hence, they could have been educated to work. In order for these women to get freed from men, they had to overcome the obstacles that were hindering them from attending educational institutions. A step for this was from Queen’s College which was established in 1848 and gave degrees to women. In the middle of the century, Collegiate School for Ladies was established by Mary

Frances Buss and Dorothea Beale in North London and Cheltenham for unmarried women's work qualification and finding an opportunity to earn an income.

Women could acquire some improvement in the regulations regarding divorce, an area where they would normally be perceived as men's properties. The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) led to a possibility for divorcing based on solid grounds. Previously, only men could divorce their wives due to betrayal alone. Women, on the other hand, were required to show evidence for their husbands' betrayal, violence, abandonment, rape, and so on. According to the declaration of The Royal Commission on Divorce in 1850, betrayal of the woman had to be taken much more seriously than of the man. Although this act permitted divorce on women's side as well, it urged a view on divorce with a double-standard.

Quite radically, women opposed to the patriarchal pattern by asking to get acceptance on the same level as men. John Stuart Mill supported women's enfranchisement when he was elected for the parliament. As a writer, both he and his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, offered a basis for the suffrage movement for women. Harriet Taylor Mill published "Enfranchisement of Women" in 1851, arguing that the alleged differences between the female and the male referred to the ones defined by nature with respect to the biological differences between the sexes. However, the idea of separate spheres, which bases itself on the biological differences, purported to women's abstraction from sources of power and strengthened the concept of womanhood as "the Sex". This served to render them fragile against male violence. She reminded that "many persons think they have sufficiently justified the restrictions on women's field of action, when they say that the pursuits from which women are excluded are unfeminine; and that the proper sphere of women is not politics or publicity, but private and domestic life" (1851). She asserted that the masculine and the feminine as culturally constructed phenomena were not in any way connected to the male and the female in actuality. She said: "we deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion, or any individual for another individual, what is and what is not their 'proper sphere'. The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to" (1851). She believed that the basis for this discourse of differences was rooted in the socialization process

of girls and boys, stating that “the habits of freedom and low indulgence on which boys grow up and the contrary notion of what is called purity in girls may have produced the appearance of different natures in the two sexes” (1851). John Stuart Mill (1869) declared that “what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing. . . What women are is what we have required them to be”.

As Harriet Mill declared, separate spheres made an unjust power balance favorable. The portrayal of “self-will and self-assertion” to be “manly virtues,” and “abnegation of self, patience, resignation, and submission to power” as “the duties and graces required of women” came to mean that “power makes itself the centre of moral obligation, and that a man likes to have his own will, but does not like that his domestic companion should have a will different from his”. She reminded, “what is wanted for women is equal rights, equal admission to all social privileges; not a position apart, a sort of sentimental priesthood” (1851). Women’s reliance on men led to a circumstance “which in nine cases out of ten, makes her either the plaything or the slave of the man who feeds her” (1869), John Stuart Mill argued. Power in publicity and in privacy were, indeed, connected to each other. Society forced women to remain far from acquisition of public power as men had been afraid of an equal power they would hold in the private sphere.

Supporters of women’s suffrage movement constantly uttered their claim that the ideology of separate spheres camouflaged significant power relations. In a meeting of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage held in 1872, Helen Taylor (Harriet Taylor Mill’s daughter) mentioned that male superiority was directly regulated by their physical power. For her, man and woman were created equal in the beginning. They consisted of the same divine image, blessed by God on equal grounds, given the power to dominate together. The supreme physical size and strength of men assigned them the duty of taking care of women. In time, this has turned

into a sovereignty that increased with exercise, until more physical power established a supremacy that has existed in greater or lesser degree until now. Under this arbitrary rule woman has been more or less degraded to the position of slave; been treated in many respects as a mere chattel, and she has rarely, if ever, been in a position fully

to develop and freely to use the powers which God has gifted her.
(cited in Kent, 1999, p. 102)

Men had started controlling the construct of womanhood. The argument of “nature” was taking women’s human rights from their hands, and depoliticizing them. Taylor said, “We are told of the peculiarities of our nature, our conditions, our duties, and our character; that is, in other words, our physical and mental inferiority, our home sphere” (cited in Kent, 1999, p. 132). She expressed the need to challenge the “great Nature” phenomenon while learning what the term Nature stood for. She rejected the truth of separate spheres ideology, questioning: “Is it ancient usage or established convention, the law or custom of our country, training, social position, the speaker’s own particular fancy or prejudice, or what?” (cited in Kent, 1999, p. 132). She also reminded that it was not possible to separate domestic politics from the living conditions of societies. Political doctrines are significant determinants of gender roles.

1.5 Masculinity in Public, Masculinity at Home

The ideology of separate spheres was not only a reality in material life; it also brought psychological dimensions to the roles attributed to the genders. Men, especially in the middle class, were undertaking unpleasant work demanding much of their energy. Working hours were long and tiresome; if a man was dealing with trade, he had to be standing on his feet all day. Significantly, since work was outside of the private sphere, it was closer to the emotionless atmosphere of commercial domain. Indeed, Victorian society was largely concerned with the gap between the moral behaviors men were to show in the private sphere and in the public sphere. Sarah Ellis (1845) stated that men in the Victorian period had “two sets of consciences . . . one conscience for the sanctuary, and another for the desk and counter” (p. 97). The business world, in other words, public sphere, was a requirement, but it was leading to moral distortion. Despite its return in the material goods, “manhood” and power, it enforced the feeling of estrangement in men. Still, home enabled men to escape from the dissentious workplace. There was tranquility at home; it offered the peace, love and caring they needed. Private sphere was also the representative of the high extent to which morality was supposed to be performed by both genders. With all its intimacy and heavenly morality, much of the value

attributed to the private sphere in the Victorian period was due to the fact that these attributes were not to be included in the corrupt world of public. However, the cure found in the private sphere had a price; attainment of the values of household necessitated a certain effort of the “strong”, “hardworking” breadwinner role. W. R. Greg mentioned at this point that “the merchant must be content to purchase the delights of domestic society and unanxious nights at the price of dying fifty thousand pounds poorer than he once expected” (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 31). This price was conceived as the compensation for all the ethical and emotional provision of the financial advancement. Actually, some Victorian middle-class males occasionally spent some time or energy for the private sphere. However, society criticized their ignorance of the “high” values in the household, which diminished the level of admiration with respect to their “success” in the public domain.

Men searched for a wife to whom they could easily discharge their stress, their indecisiveness and wishes. Home was the ultimate sphere where they could take the mask of power off for a while. The understanding manner wife showed while listening to him and the relaxing words she used to calm him down were the source of the healing they were seeking in the private sphere. So long as these traits were employed by a wife, discrepancies in some other areas could be neglected. Eliza Wilson, a Victorian woman commenting about her approaching marriage, expressed her anxiety about her “insufficient” intellectual abilities. However, “[she] will hope on, for a sympathising heart must be of more value in a wife than a powerful intellect” (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 54). This role was highly promoted among the females of the period. They were also taught not to hope for a reciprocal empathy or sentimental aid in their relationships. As the husband came home at the end of an exhausting work day, his woman was expected to relieve his load and soothe his spirit, besides striving for that “cheerful complacency”; not to mention that all these would not mean she quit her domestic duties, which would only distress the man’s hard-earned tranquility. Husband’s needs were held above all. The rule in wife’s turn was to satisfy these needs in return for the material welfare and protection he provided her with.

Victorian gender norms gave a characteristic role to the wife in order to present huge love and support to her husband. What we may call as an emotional necessity in our day was referred to as an ethical one in the period. The stress put on the Victorian morals was not in correlation with its intensity, though. All middle-class Victorian men wanted their households to represent a moral image, which, in turn, would improve their own sensation towards life. In accordance with the heavenly image of womanhood, the guardians of these gender performances were the angels in the house – they were sometimes mothers, sometimes daughters, or most importantly, wives, who were believed to have the angelic responsibility to their husbands. The notion that this was being considered as the main aim of a wife was revealed by the altered usage of the term “help-meet”. The term formerly stood for the role of the wife as a contributor to the economy; now, it referred to her moral performance. Benjamin Goodwin, the Bradford Baptist minister, told his son who was still single at the age of twenty-eight (1843, cited in Koditschek, 1990):

You have no ‘help meet’, no one when you retire from the warehouse to whisper in your ear thoughts of holier and better things, to encourage you in domestic devotions, but you are left a prey to all the unchecked solitudes of business, from the morning light to far in the evening shades, if not also on your solitary pillow. (p. 209)

After a while, the son married. Besides the term “help-meet”, the word “angel” gained its connection to femininity and domesticity. A holy messenger in its origins, the angel was considered as a selfless preacher whose existence increased others’ feelings of the need for morality. For instance, women who helped the poor were obviously regarded as angels, but the private sphere was the first and most important for her to perform that angelic role. It was not possible for men to be called angels in this respect; they would not match with those supreme associations that would describe femininity, either.

Home, under the management of woman was the spot for male comfort. Women were required to create a physically neat and clean house, an alluring fireside, a table full of delicious meals, and relaxing care to the sick at home. John Heaton, a doctor in the Victorian period, described his wife, Fanny as “the presiding genius of cheerful regularity”. Daniel Macmillan, a publisher, counted his blessings for his wife as such (1853): “and then to have a quiet home, and quiet

evenings with one's wife, all that one requires, and all without great toil and anxiety" (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 56). The key phrase was comfort without effort for men. William Landelsput, a bestselling writer, put forth that "man has no aptitude for domestic duties, and so long as they require to be done – that is, so long as the world lasts – woman will be required to do them" (cited in Nelson, 2010, p. 55). This view had already become a much more widely welcome one among the society than the assertion that household duties were to be shared.

A blessing marriage provided for the genders was supposed to be intimate and spare time. The basic requirement in it was that woman and man had to accompany each other regularly and frequently. When anyone in marriage was stressed out, however, it was generally the wife who was to blame since her attempts to perform some complaisant activities outside her home would cause her to ignore the familial needs. The belief that men had the utmost authority on domestic life was commonly accepted not only by the males, but also by the females, even the ones who were writing advice books for women. Married women usually mentioned the authorial shift from the father to the husband; women were laying their "independence" down upon the authority in any way. This obedience was justified by the governance and physical support given by the man. Managing the domestic workforce with the intention of productivity was seriously making them feel like the manager of the domestic sphere, while procuring actions through which it could be maintained. However, the work produced inside the household was going outdated, especially among the middle-class people. It could not, indeed, be labelled as "work". This category, implying respect and dignity, belonged only to the "work" "he" did in the public sphere, and earned money out of it. This fact explained the grounds where he asked for the constant support and loyalty of his wife and children. Any failing efforts to be the giver would damage his identity of manhood and prevent his access to the authoritative position. If a wife filed charges against her husband in this respect, this would mean hitting him at his weakest point. Hence, the rank had to be given to the "breadwinner". Men's unquestionable power and prestige needed to be settled at home. Eventually, no one in the household questioned the responsibility of the man because the salary he brought to the house was ruling. Whether the wife was able to manage while remaining

inferior to her husband or not was the issue. As the most prominent didactic authors of the period stated, while the husband supplied the family with material needs and exercised his authority, the duty of taking care of the household was the wife's.

Sexuality was quite a recent topic to contemplate on by the Victorian people. The male-female model was replacing any notions regarding the uniformity of the sexes. A number of antitheses were generated on the differences between the sexes, arousing the suspicion of how a man and a woman could ever mentally unite on an issue. The Victorian period, especially the mid-period, probably experienced the sharpest distinction regarding the differences in the roles of men and women. Marriage, in this point, was the spot where sensibility and appropriateness were constantly being provided for the person in need; hence, gender boundaries were drawn much more clearly. There was no doubt that men were too glad for gaining that highness in morality; women were also too willing to provide it. Ironically, the Victorian pressure to moralize made this acquisition a strain. Husbands were dealing with the moral distraction caused by the public sphere. On the contrary, wives were being blessed with the situations where they led secluded lives, keeping their moral perceptions clear. Here lied the foundations of a role gap which could possibly be thought of as a “natural” difference of the sexes by both parties. Men's desire to find emotional support was an implicit burden, considering the overwhelming work life and the constant promotion of morality in the public sphere. A lot of women were suppressed under it; men experienced the adverse effects as well. The divine perception of motherhood was added to this process, too; the role of wife was inevitably spoiled by the role of mother. So, the image of a woman, together with her identity, was clouded.

1.6 Religion and Gender Roles

Religion, regarded as the guarantee of peace in marriages, was indeed full of conflicting messages about how gender roles must be arranged. No differently from the marriage institution, all forms of Christianity were decorated with the hints of inequality between the sexes. St Paul's command, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” formed the basis of

imbalance in how gender roles were constructed. William Austin, a Baptist secular clergyman, stated as a married man in the mid-Victorian period (Davidoff, 1987, p. 270):

My beloved wife is all to me that I could require in most respects – in other respects she is improving. Bless the Lord. This evening I returned home, found my wife under the influence of a little temptation – rather dissatisfied and unhappy through having been alone all day. But I talked, we read and bowed at the Family Altar, the Lord broke her heart and humbled her before him so that we were greatly blessed.

As the commentary shows, patriarchy, with all the regulations it had made throughout the society, was explicitly imposed on the gender roles by Christian doctrines. Methodism introduced a new view into Christianity, but their approach did not contradict with the basic Christian teachings, either. Their founder dictated as such: “Whoever, therefore, would be a good wife, let this sink into her inmost soul, ‘My husband is my superior, my better: he has the right to rule over me. God has given it him, and I will not strive against God’” (cited in Greven, 1977, p. 127). As the household was noticeably the main area for the “religion of the heart”, wife’s sacredness was bound to increase. The husband signified the authority of the Heavenly Father, and the wife represented Christian love and holy insight. Family prayer conducted by the father was always more important than any prayer of the other family members. A setting where the prayers of women were required was death bed, though. The reason for that is, not surprisingly, their assumed role as the spiritual relievers of the household.

Hence, the domestic ideal and gender roles were directly connected with obedience to all Christian doctrines. The regular propaganda on the importance of domesticity in the public sphere throughout the period was significantly targeting young, unmarried men so as to inform the generation on their forthcoming roles. There were surely some problems on the way. In the middle class, a group of men appeared to rise against the reconciliation private sphere offered, with their inclination to live in companionship with male mates. Still, the majority was not even questioning the validity of domestic life.

Participants of Chartism, a movement defending working class rights, portrayed men as hard-working, durable and calm, striving to protect their women and

children at home from the immorality and corruptness of capitalism. However, they could not do it completely as they wished. Gerald Massey, a Chartist poet, reflected his view of gender roles as such (cited in Kent, 1999, p. 143):

Our Fathers are Praying for Pauper Pay

Our Mothers with Death's Kiss are white;

Our Sons are the Rich Man's Serfs by day,

And our Daughters his Slaves by night.

Again, men and sons possessed the dominating position over women and daughters in the private sphere. J.R. Stephens, a Methodist minister, stated that a working man was the guardian of home and family. "For child and wife, we will war to the knife!", he claimed. According to the Chartists, women who strived hard to feed their children by working under hard circumstances such as factories, or trying to afford the house rent and buy food because their husbands had deserted them, were undergoing these difficulties because of "the rich, the capitalists". Domesticity, in this respect, would save people from deviation; a positive change in the 'guidman' was almost guaranteed "as he [came] home on Saturday evening to read his Circular, and [watched] over the interests of his family" (Thomson, 1841). This ideal "guidman" belonging to the Chartist activity created a new concept of masculinity. The new ideal, with its balanced, home-focused breadwinner characteristics, pleased the society altogether. Women thought that marrying these men would be much better than the marriages previously made. From men's perspective, it was an opportunity for regaining the respected male image that had been affected by heavy industrialization. In actuality, this sober breadwinner imagery could not completely be achieved as the majority of men did not receive a salary that would suffice to feed the wife and the children with no extra wage. Women were required to join the workforce, too, especially in the working middle-class families. Hence, a definition of masculinity relying on the extent to which they could feed their family, and a definition of femininity involving all the duties of household care and nurturing would aggravate the struggle between women and men to get a job. Employers in factories were regarding women as cheaper workforce than men, which caused men to plan depriving women of their

places, where instead they wanted themselves to be. This concern exceeded the social life, moving on to the political circles. In the working class, they thought they had to adopt the same concept of domesticity taken over by the middle and upper class people.

1.7 Fatherhood

Amongst the roles attributed to men, fatherhood was probably the least speculated by the Victorian society. The matter of when to marry commonly took place in public. In addition, the value of independent, respectful work was being underlined. During sermons, the ethical qualifications of manhood was the most important subject. On the other hand, fatherhood responsibilities were not stressed as much. It was only during the late Victorian period when this role began to be challenged due to certain social fractures. This avoidance was due to the fact that being a father, as well as a mother, was a job handled in the private sphere, where it was kept away from examination and observation. Another dimension was the fact was that fatherhood was being considered as a “natural” part of being male, so it did not necessitate any further intervention. Underneath this perception lied a vague position of fatherhood as a gender role in the Victorian family. Indeed, the fact that it was positioned in the private sphere was the basic problem. If gender roles crossed the borders of the separate spheres, it had to be mothers’ role to do the job. However, since the moral claims of domestic ideal had an influence on both genders, being a father was a benchmark in the male dependence to the household. Because of this contradictory views on the role of fatherhood, a large blurriness could be mentioned regarding the exact expectation. Were they basically assistants to the mothers? Were they expected to present some unique values and teachings to their children? Or did they have to copy the performance mothers were offering to their children, as much as their natures allowed? Apart from all this confusion, men were absolutely conditioned by the idea that making children was an essential component of masculinity. According to Catharine Beecher, a famous American educator, male performance at work in the public sphere was prompted by “the desire for a home of his own, and the hopes of paternity” (cited in Tosh, 1999). For instance, Charles Kingsley, a priest and university

professor, spoke of his first child in an exhilarated manner as he said: “My little baby, the next link in the golden chain of generations, begotten of our bliss” (cited in Tosh, 1999). A private blessing, this news was not supposed to be a public share, and only the couple were to share their pleasure with one another. However, public effect was to be considered as well. If a man was married but did not have any children, this reputation was detectable by the public. Businessmen without children, for instance, were observed to fluctuate in terms of their aims later on, due to the crisis that they did not possess a heir to pass their business on to in the future. Especially having a boy was the favorable case in that fathers needed a boy to sustain their family name and pass the masculine features to forthcoming generations. John Heaton, a British politician, took down in his diary upon having his daughter as a newborn baby: “I was considerably disappointed that the baby was not a boy”. However, his mood upon the second child was totally different. “Fanny gave birth to a Son & Heir– John Arthur Dakeyne Heaton. This event was the occasion of great rejoicing” (cited in Tosh, 1999).

In the Victorian period, what men in the role of fatherhood were seriously concerned with in their minds was the material necessities. Many middle-class fathers were known to experience the risk of losing their jobs, they could not fail in their jobs since they were expected to be the breadwinner of their family. Any mistakes he would do during the process might cost them a lot of additional burden. Even though there did not exist a risk of poverty, the duty to feed children well enough, starting from birth, was a burden in itself. From this perspective, the birth of a child triggered the sense a man with father’s role was supposed to feel in material duties. This sense was socially integrated into the overall construction of fatherhood. In order for a man to be socially approved, he had to demonstrate his independence and assets required to be the leader of a family. Also, in the public sphere, the sacrificing masculinity was constantly being promoted so as to influence children on how giving their fathers were. John Angell James (1852) wrote in *The Young Man’s Friend*, “How often, when bearing the heat and burden of the day has he wiped away the sweat of his brow, and exclaimed, with the smile of hope, ‘Well, my boy will one day reward me for all this’”. This message was also being transferred to the next generation,

targeting male children. Marianne Farningham, a novelist, stressed out the faithfulness and virtue of the fathers who “have toiled and deprived themselves of many comforts for your sake” (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 82). Indeed, life in the household was dependent on “that active brain and those busy hands. If he stops, then the whole must stop” (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 82). Within the upper-class group, fatherhood was linked to aids, gifts, trips to different cities or countries, and paying sons 2 debts. Father’s expenses was the implication of how much his efforts cost, and how powerful he was in reaching the market in financial terms. Gifts from fathers to children were, in this point, the outcome of his duty as the breadwinner of the family.

As fathers were absent throughout the day, daily family prayers took the form of rituals needed to be initiated by them. These prayers functioned as the protector of the patriarchal order in the private sphere. Arthur Munby, a barrister in the period, referred to these prayers as such (1864, cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 84):

This evening at nine we had prayers in the library as usual: my father sitting at the centre table and reading for the twentieth time one of those good sincere old sermons, full of the simple Calvinistic Protestantism of thirty years ago. . . . The master of the house, every year more reverend and more worthy, . . . reading thus gravely and with undoubting faith: such a scene so long repeated gains from habit and affection a sacredness and sublimity which has little to do with the merit of the things read, though it reflects a certain beauty upon them also.

The message was clear: the role of the father was both to be far from and to rule over the family. Male role as the father could not be limited to breadwinning; it involved protecting the family from any sexual inappropriateness. This role was quite a gendered one. Protection of the vulnerability of both the wife and the daughter(s) by the husband was the prerequisite. Sarah Ellis says with respect to the daughters that the father “folds her tenderly in his arms, toils for her subsistence and comfort, and watches over her expanding beauty that he may shield it from all blight”. Avoiding the daughter when she was a little child, and then protecting her virginity when she grew up were some other traits the respectable father was responsible for.

In connection with being that authoritative figure in the household, masculinity was mainly based on performing superiority over any other person living in the house, including servants. The tradition entailed that children depend on their

father since he took care of them and they were not at the age of decision-making yet. Not only boys but also daughters were required to do service for their fathers. Christopher Anderson, a didactic writer of the period, summarized the masculine role as: “I merely require to act”. In addition, there was a point behind boys’ calling their fathers as “the Guv’ner”.

1.8 Boys Becoming Men

The way boys evolve into manhood was a designed process in the Victorian period, especially within the middle-class people. Firstly, he acquired the belief that he was not just a child, but a male child, around the age of six. He was even allowed to wear breeches and trousers. A detail to notice here is that when they were little, they wore petticoats, as little girls did. As commonly known, differences between the genders are constructed on the alleged divide between their sexual natures. This construction was operated on children, and marked differences between the sexes from early childhood. Phil Holt, a six-year-old child, was depicted by his father as “looking very sturdy and well – he struts about in his knickerbockers and speaks in a deep important voice and gives himself such airs that he constantly makes us laugh” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 104). This commentary was parallel to the perception of gender as a collection of roles adopted in time.

Boys in the Victorian period had more freedom to act according to their wishes than girls, which made them spend most of their time outside of the house, and socialize with other boys. They took nursery lessons with their sisters, but when they became six or seven-year-old children, their education at home generally came to a close. The common belief was that schools got boys ready for a world in ways that home schooling was not able to. The fundamentals taught there not only consisted of school subjects, but there was also a process of mental disciplining. Joshua Murgatroyd, an engineer, counselled his 13-year-old son to comprehend that boys would be much more successful in business life when they learned to “fix their thoughts on what their mind ought to be engaged with” (Tosh, 1999, p. 105). School was also regarded as the basic step to teach males to form groups with each other. There, boys learnt how to coexist peacefully with their peers, compete with one another, and obey the public rules. In some

schools, especially the ones where preachers were educators, if the students' fathers were far away or dead, these preachers became the substitutes for those fathers in teaching how to be proper men.

When a boy was a teenager, his sexual education was under his father's responsibility. Most of the fathers did not do anything specific about it, while some exhibited suppressive behavior with reference to morality and social ethics. Apart from these, the dangers sexuality would cause in the public sphere was what some fathers were declaring. Underlying such polarization concerning how sex is to be perceived by men was the opposite approaches of the religious and the worldly experienced. Among the middle-class boys, the gap between adolescence and marriage lasted between ten and fifteen years. Within this period, however, middle-class girls were the prohibited zone. The construct of chaste, respectable woman before marriage did not let these men get into an intimate relationship with a girl from their social circle. For this reason, these men sought sexual activities outside the public sphere. In many parts of Britain, there were available prostitutes appealing to various budgets. These men between puberty and marriage constituted the main market in this point. It was, however, defined as one of the temptations of "loose life" in Anthony Trollope's words. One needs to add to the commentary Trollope makes that impact of peer pressure was enormous in this respect. Sex was equal to the entrance to the domain of manhood; when a male did it often, it proved to be an impressive act for the other males around him. A man who did not comply with this process of manhood was either averse to sex, or a "perfect" embodiment of the man with self-discipline.

Although the frequency of sexual activity strengthened the role of masculinity, the total formation of manhood relied on marriage. As a single man, they could enjoy the benefits of female society; as a married man, they were able to experience all benefits of masculinity. A man signed his gender identity through the acts of establishing a family, performing authority over the subordinates, and overtaking the duty of sustaining a life with the family.

Hence, the way boys turn into man was presented within a "naturally" developing process. In the Victorian period, becoming a man started with isolating oneself from the feminine household. Being a man necessitated a

certain achievement in the material world, which mostly brought about a threatening life. A man was always identified in comparison with his peers. Reaching the position of a man was not, therefore, an act of nature; rather, it was a designed process full of conflicts and dispute. William Landels, a famous Baptist writer declared in a brochure named *How Men Are Made* (1859) that men “do not simply grow”; they are formed “not by passively yielding to an internal pressure, but by the putting forth of an internal force which resists and masters, if it cannot change, the outward” (p. 42). He also mentioned later on “that man was never worth anything who simply grew into a man by passive growth, as the acorn grows into the oak”. As seen, men had to achieve manhood by going through many battles.

Personality traits were the other factors that got men stressed in their formation of manhood. The main acquisitions they needed to be after were free will, endless energy and motivation, bravery and righteousness. For the Victorian people, the key to performing manhood was independence, and this was attained with a work of self-improvement. A man was expected to behave in total autonomy of ideas and choices. Undoubtedly, such independence could be achieved only within the competitive environment including his peers. In all public homilies, this topic was persistently encouraged. This was a recurrent theme of paternal homilies. Robert Holt, an English politician, wrote to his son, Richard that “[he] must fight for [his] places [in class] as [they] have to do in the Town Council” (cited in Tosh, 1999, p. 111). In addition, performing a man’s role definitely had physical references. Self-guarding, being ready to fight whenever necessary were some examples. Victorian period was a time when male combatting was still a criteria to manhood as well as fist-fighting. Sports and physical exercises were counted as “manly” activities with regards to their function as keeping men fit and energetic. Some of them were cricket, rowing and archery. A man was also to be recognized by his facial features, voice and masculine handshake. Directly proving his sexual potency, the physically strong man evoked the masculine prestige and ability to “conquest” the other sex.

1.9 Social Construction of Gender in Wilde's Plays

This thesis analyzes the ways through which Oscar Wilde challenges gender constructions in the late Victorian period. In three of his plays; *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), he employs characters and scenes that suggest gender performativity. Seeing this as a threat to human nature and creativity, he reveals the effects of the gender stereotypes and fixities of gender roles. These three plays have been selected deliberately since they will provide a junction point on a subtle creation of gender construction, marriage, due to the fact that it reflects the composite impact of all power units within societies, such as religion, law, education, or politics. Surely, marriage is not the mere theme to be issued; relationships between women and men, parents' relationships with their children and individual struggles to gain self-approval within the society will be viewed with reference to their results.

Although some literary scholars like Joseph Bristow and Alan Sinfield state that Wilde employs subversion of conventional Victorian values in a limited way, when one takes into consideration that Wilde's style as a radical critic and writer was not interrupted by the genres he wrote in - even if they belonged to bourgeois tradition, his success becomes visible. Under the light of this, Wilde's aim can be regarded as highlighting the problematic matters, instead of declining or hiding them. The imitation of conventions and the stress made on them in his works carries the aim of inciting the audience.

Furthermore, Wilde assumes that pure pleasure, excluding the aim of reproduction, can be the target in sexuality. His notion of sexuality depicts that the ways sexuality is processed within the society are inseparable to the ways political economy is understood. Some may argue that the reason why he challenges the sexual constructs is due to his own sexual preference and his desire to gain a sexually free life; his establishment of luxury settings and themes actually signals his desire to undermine and deconstruct all gender – related identities in general. Spending effort for pleasure was, in a way, rebelling against the connection traditionally made between luxury and femininity. The late Victorian period issued this connection regarding both “newly” existent homosexuals and avant-garde literary people. The female

brought to mind superfluous expenditure in the Victorian society. For instance, in *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are too much keen on consuming food. From another perspective, it must be recognized that the women's attempt to consume the foods without waiting for their husbands' consent points out the individual enjoyment Wilde attributes to his female characters. Instead of pleasing people other than themselves, women want to enjoy food for their own benefit. In an era when women were compelled to prove their "value" for the sake of male dominated order, these characters' behavior is quite unusual. Similarly, the role of men as husbands, or as lovers, are put on the table. Husbands are overwhelmed by the expectations bestowed upon them, lovers display multiple identities in order to lead the life of their own desire while fulfilling their duties towards their fiancées. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, parents' relationships with their siblings are groundbreaking in that traditional gender performances are spoilt and are not displayed in the "proper" manner.

The first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* denies many "beautiful" manners of the cultivated social life, including women's mother-daughter roles accepted as natural. The bond a daughter is supposed to feel towards her mother is unintentionally distorted by herself, which had been cut off by the mother much before just to be maintained again years later. Only by relinquishing herself can the mother bring an end to this paradox. However, this sacrifice does not leave the mother in a condition different than herself; she is still the clever character in her surroundings. Besides, she welcomes a husband in her life due to the self-sacrifice she demonstrates; however, her selflessness does not transform her into a weaker figure.

It can be asserted that every claim in the play carries its binary opposition with itself for the aims of blurring the distinction of the meanings attached. A woman socially named as corrupt carries affection and might sacrifice herself, while a "good" one is callous. A womanizer may turn out to be a model husband representing loyalty. All types of behaviors typical of a man and a woman are put under reconsideration. The striking instance for that is Lord Windermere's hiding Mrs. Erlynne's true identity from Lady Windermere. This seems the only way for the conservation of the "sacred" link between the daughter and her

mother; loving and respecting someone his wife loathes is not a proper route to take. Lady Windermere would also have to confront her own “tainted” past when discovering Mrs. Erlynne as her mother. The point which should be recognized here is that Wilde does not lead the audience into the secret throughout the play; instead, he keeps them in a position where they are free to criticize the construct of the sacrificing mother and side with an aggressive daughter model.

Detonating the stereotypical gender roles is the ultimate way through which Wilde announces a challenge to the binaries, including the natural and the artificial, good and bad, feminine and masculine. He initiates the deconstruction with the assertion of Lady Windermere as the ideal woman model, who is known as chaste, angel-like, childish and innocent. Mrs. Erlynne is placed opposite to Lady Windermere in that she displays the opposite traits Lady Windermere does. The ironical conclusion awaiting the audience at the end is that these two are inseparably bound to each other as mother and daughter. While Wilde issues how falsified the traditional constructs of gender are, he also reflects self-sacrifice as a motherly feature. However, he blurs the line between conventional construction and its undermining, as a result of which Mrs. Erlynne does not experience an overall rebirth and change into the popular “reformed sinner” figure. Wilde rejects blending her into the conventional “fallen woman” so that the audience could not locate her into a specific position in their minds and hence leave her in another world outside the socially learnt moral conduct. Further, in the play this fallen woman does not “fall” in real terms; instead, she gets to a financially comfortable position and finds her desire in marriage. The play proceeds through a chain of ironical developments in this sense. A woman, seemingly not meeting the purposes expected of her, turns out to be a mediator between husband and wife. On the contrary, there is always left a question mark on whether this woman is fallen or not, as she marries for the sake of financial welfare, not love. Wilde’s examination of the distance between appearance and truth works well to prove that Mrs. Erlynne is not necessarily a socially disturbing identity. Taking the ironical web further, Wilde demonstrates that the Duchess of Berwick, formerly recognized as the constant defender of marriage institution, is indeed a gossip who can greatly

harm it. All knowledge regarding the characters' gender identities are have been inverted towards the end of the play. Attitudes creating strife in the beginning ends up with understanding and mildness.

In the second play, *An Ideal Husband*, the construction of woman appears to comply with the traditional line of morality at first glance, where women are the representatives of emotions rather than logic. This concept was surely a common one during the nineteenth century. Intellect was not observed as a component to benefit women in societal domains. For instance, Lady Chiltern's inability to conduct a "rational compromise", which is, assisting in the secrecy of her husband, renders her improper for getting acceptance into the "logical" sphere. Indeed, however, the female characters in the play, under the leadership of the two main ones, put forth their intellectual capabilities in a way which trouble the conservative perception of the society regarding women. Mrs. Cheveley exploits the beliefs on women both by her physical appearance and by competitiveness. Wilde portrays her as susceptible to an uncontrollable, emotional nature in many cases. This may look appealing to a typical perception of womanhood, but her extremities in attitude and decision-making makes her a type of antagonist to the angelic image elevated in the Victorian moral frame. She is not loyal to a household, family, or husband. Her blackmail to the Chilterns for financial aims proves her indignity in a large sense. Her malicious intentions cause the audience to view her as a criminal type of woman, different from the expected image. She can be compared to Mrs. Erlynne in this respect. Mrs. Erlynne do not follow a similar malice; however, her image is another sort of threat to the portrayal of the proper female. Her excuses are resembled to self-explosion of a criminal; she even becomes "dreadful to look at" in Goring's terms as she tries to justify herself (III p. 133).

Lady Chiltern is reverberated as the good woman of the play. She needs help in two aspects; the female threat to her marriage, and her own peccable beliefs. Her husband has fallen into disfavor now; his friend Lord Goring intends to support her in both behavior and value. Moreover, as the play proceeds, it becomes unclear whether Goring follows the principles onto which his manly world clings while helping her, or puts his fingers on it for one time. Though he asks Sir Chiltern if she ever "suffer[ed] any regret for what [he] had done" (II p.

63) and gets “no” as a reply, he goes on to support him. His decision leads to the questioning of values such as virtue, strength and durability a man is ideally expected to display in his interactions.

Not only the social order contributing to the menacing traits but also individuals’ participation to the construction processes are held responsible in the play. The point Wilde actually makes is that the defined ideals either do not intersect with the behaviors or a thing as “ideal” do not exist at all. Marriage institution proves itself to be no more than a tool for social ease. Lady Chiltern falls into a depressive mood and Mabel Chiltern realizes a tough fact in that a husband sanctioned by social ideals is merely a dream. The only peace giving marriage will probably be Mabel and Goring’s since they quit chasing the ideal. From a woman’s perspective, an ideal husband may be a pliable one. On the condition that the ideal means the appropriate, the constructed husband within the culture is a vacant expression. When an ideal husband and wife is only a dream, one cannot rely on the customary figures of woman, man or marriage.

The most obvious clue the play gives about the falsity of idealizations is that they are not applicable in real life. There exist multiple plights in the play and defending a world full of ideal identities gets harder. The Chilterns’ future is in the hands of a “sinner” woman, Mrs. Erlynne, and bringing it onto a peaceful level is troubled by the weakening of Sir Chiltern, the protagonist. Lady Chiltern, the shareholder of this future, unknowingly collaborates with the sinner woman with respect to challenging the social foundations of female identity when she asks for a reconstruction of its rules. Then, the possibility of enabling a clean future passes on the dandy, who can be noted as belonging to the world of ideals on one hand but not acting upon it on the other. Not similar to the dandies in the other plays, who constitute the comic effect, Goring does not appear to behave in order to benefit himself. He does not participate in a strife on his intention. Since he is not strictly engaged with the expectations of the ideal world, it is possible for him to go through personal and social interactions freely. He becomes functional when a female character who is outside the socially drawn borders comes in. These two are distinctive in the way they demolish the gender roles in their own paths. Regarding Goring, it is also probable to claim that he can seep into the motives behind people’s actions

and does not content himself with what is seen on the surface. He enables the audience to learn that Mrs. Cheveley is initially ruled by covetousness, Lady Chiltern is driven by a feeling of honor due to managing Sir Chiltern's actions, and the Chilterns are overwhelmed with the desire of power even more than money. Thus, his assistance in the revelation of the rotten traits of women and men must be considered as a key theme in the play.

The third play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is often mentioned as Wilde's unique play in that it does not pick a single side in terms of theme, structure or technics. It presents an "undercurrent of seriousness" (Powell, 2009, p. 125) that has not been viewed in the comedy plays of the period. While issuing "serious" topics such as marriage, public identity, and love, the play blends these into a form which enables us to analyze the artifice in their background. Wilde inverts commonly used expressions, creating a distortion in language and meanings, namely, the beliefs society holds on to.

The play's details are carefully based on trivial matters. The most interesting female figures considered, Cecily and Gwendolyn have been attacked by many critics because of attributing such an amount of meaning to a name. Some critics might have even regarded these girls' attitude as anomalousness. On the boys' side, the two main characters, Algernon and Jack are only occupied with petty pursuits, the former's is eating, and the latter's, smoking. These actions seem a mocking confirmation of upper class occupations by the middle class. With a tone similar to *An Ideal Husband*, though in a more entire sense, the play renounces the knowledge on many gendered behaviors.

Not only does the play put a distance between the female-male social constructs of the world and itself, but it also makes fun of those constructed realities. Statements on morality are equated with trivialities when they are made at irrelevant times or when their components are replaced with insignificant material. For instance, Miss Prism does not exhibit the pity or affection associated with women's behavior upon hearing the death of Jack's brother; the irrelevant moral teaching she makes is "as a man sows, so shall he reap" (II p. 45). Another example is Lady Bracknell's expectation from a man; she is strict in the male occupation of any sort, which would go well with the Victorian moral code that man is the breadwinner. However, as she equalizes smoking

with an occupation, an immense social construct is emptied out. Moral job divisions between women and men do not represent a true value. Cecily do not side with the helpful and supportive type of woman who she believes Gwendolyn is; more, Jack declares that "a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness" (I p. 14), and Lady Bracknell assures the others of the distance between feeling well and behaving well (I p. 20), two paths people are expected to lead parallel to each other in the hypocritical social life.

Significantly, the termination of following the societal roles in the play does not prove anybody's depravity. Robert J. Jordan expresses that "the absence of a moral sense ... does not let loose sin and degradation, because to a large extent these things do not exist, except as unemotional abstractions" (1970, p. 105). In the play, the biggest mischief could be when you steal the householder's food.

In addition, almost all characters are face to face with an either small or big challenge. They do not fall into the illusions served to them; instead, they modify the rules in their own ways. The situation of having a name other than Ernest is never a problem since they can just change it in a moment, and the confusion is resolved. The norms of social life are withheld as the characters leave the socially constructed behaviors and speeches. For example, both the parent-child relationship and the language used in its performance are undermined. This confirms Wilde's eagerness to play with all popular constructs until they occur as merely a tool to laugh at, not to mention the gender traits being his foremost subject.

It would be unjust to allege that the issues of the play serve merely to a theme of escapism regarding Jack and Algernon's name changing. Indeed, the play allows a space where many coincidental events and surprising human reactions are welcome and the presumed manners of the society are left out, like the stability in a love relationship. Besides, filial relationships, specifically mother-child relationship is put under the scope. In Wilde's former plays, the protagonists were generally deprived of a regular filial relationship due to a missing parent or orphanage issue. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a similar theme is weaved with a difference; the young characters are not under the governance of a parent except Lady Bracknell and her motherly figure exists

merely to be crushed. Her place as a mother is open to interrogation since her daughter can already carry her desire into effect, meanwhile cutting up the authority of this mother figure, in a way uncommon to the Victorian mother-daughter relationship. Hence, examining parent-child relationships in the play is of utmost importance in that they reveal an overturn of typical Victorian gender roles.

Obviously, Wilde's desire is to ensure that the world is livable when women, and of course men, are able to perform their own preferences. New identities including new roles must be recognized as people got more place in the industry and started adopting new habits of consumption and seeking delight. This should not mean that he believes in the validity of the economic structure which has been produced by the physical needs of capitalism. What he suggests is that it is possible to direct a considerable amount of inner energy to feelings and activities of person's own wish as the current exchange system allows a space for that. Privacy and free choice in gender behaviors can be radiant, despite the corrupt structure served by the society.



2. LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN: GENDER CONVENTIONS ON A SLIPPERY ROAD

Lady Windermere's Fan (1892) is known as the first of Wilde's comedy plays. It differs from his former societal plays in that it issues lives in a world which is familiar enough to the audience to associate with, but also far in terms of the upper class atmosphere dominant in the setting and manners. The play's wit is accepted as a radiant feature, with the extravagant costumes whom the fashion magazines copied (Kaplan and Stowell, 1994). The first production of the play owed its success probably to the references to the traditions and manners of the Victorian society. In a 1994 production by Philip Prowse, the same, unchanging paths through which social values were based on were being recognized. Trivial dialogues led nowhere even though the characters spent considerable time and effort to perform those dialogues. This modern version is renowned as a strong reflection of how Wilde's concept of societal order is, indeed, a representation of social imprisonment.

The contemporary performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan* resulted in success; yet, this was ironic because the audience was indeed appraising the criticism of social morals they had been living up to. Even though they were impressed by what the majority of the critics considered as a shallow play, they probably were not conscious of the morality and gender deconstruction the play was exercising. At first glance, the play appeared to issue some sensational themes of the contemporary drama, the fallen woman being in the first place. Just as in other social plays, in this play Wilde presented the society, in fact a new area of the Victorian society where "the heroine of the Divorce Court [was] the lioness of the drawing room" and the "harlot and adulteress [were] the ideals of washy sentimentalists (Linton, 1892, p. 793). The play was undermining the late Victorian moral codes, specifically socially constructed definitions of women and men. In this context, this chapter aims to discuss the improbability of

gender fixity in the play, while emphasizing the themes of marriage and parent-sibling relationships as key points of Wilde's deconstruction of gender roles.

Wilde's social plays commonly reflect two main themes within their "serious" plots; ethics and matrimony. Both male and female characters, as well as the dandies present their ideas on these categories. Marriage is seen as a solemn responsibility, especially by the females. For instance, when Lady Windermere announces, "Windermere and I married for love" (I p. 21), it can be thought that she stresses out the essentiality of love as the basis in marriage; however, her following speeches show her recognition of the need to get married in order to gain a social position as a woman.

2.1 Morality and Its Impact on the Perception of Gender

Puritan characters, or Puritan ideas in Wilde's plays generally play a seemingly small but functionally big role. Audience can feel the moral content of the social plays with regards to them. The model of morality in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is obviously Lady Windermere. Even she is aware of the intense ethical properties she displays, and we can see it in her speech to Lord Darlington:

. . . I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it. My mother died when I was a mere child. I lived always with Lady Julia, my father's elder sister, you know. She was stern to me, but she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. She allowed of no compromise. I allow of none. (I p.9)

Hence, it is no surprise to the reader that when Lord Windermere requests that she invite Mrs. Erlynne to the party, she strictly rejects because a woman with an unclear past cannot have place in her house. She discriminates between women like Mrs. Erlynne and others, and says, "I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal" (I p.15). Lord Windermere divulges the issue by reinforcing her position, saying, "How hard good women are!" (I p. 29).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Britain witnessed an emphasis on immorality in the nineteenth century. Avoiding sexual intercourse before marriage was elevated, whereas people were tried to deter from masturbating and prostitution. Campaigns on these issues were led in not only political but also educational area. Institutions holding power also had attempts to abolish

matters such as birth control, nudity in art and painting, and eroticism in literature. Even after the century ended, the impacts of these norms have continued ruling lives. Parenting, laws on sex, medicine, or the conceptualization of sexuality itself carry the traces of Victorian tradition. One indication of this strict morality is viewed when Mr. Hopper wishes to take Agatha, the girl he wants to marry, to Australia. Her mother objects to it; Cecil, a friend of Lord Windermere, calls him “nature’s gentleman”. His manners are found unfavorable. Quite possibly, he desires to have sex with Agatha freely far from her hometown, but the probability of having sex without marriage is out of question. Hopper seems to stand for the normative aspect of the society which is to be deconstructed by characters such as Mrs. Erlynne with their perceptions on the moral roles marriage attaches to women and men.

As long as women and men are seen as beings of different nature, life standards and opportunities will continue to be unequal. For Lady Windermere, all people, whether a man or woman, must be punished when committing affairs outside marriage. Rules and laws are not changeable according to being female or male. Though Darlington tries to lead the argument around the notion that women are mostly forgiving in the case of infidelity in modern societies, Lady Windermere is rather strict in her vindication that unfaithful men as well as women are to be sentenced to necessary contempt. She says: “If we had 'these hard and fast rules,' we should find life much more simple” (I p.12) after Lord Darlington’s criticism of strict rules, which results in a sarcastic dialogue reflecting Wilde’s degradation of societal discipline in gender roles. The importance of a requirement of balance lies in the fact that gender differences may disappear if the two sexes are exposed to similar social conditions and role expectations. But this means the collapse of both individual understanding of gender and its cultural extensions which require obedience. While structure shapes gender roles, it is also shaped by the outcome.

The language Wilde uses in his plays often includes paradoxes and epigrams. His epigrams imply that love and misdeed, nature and impulses, innocence and sin are blurred. Wilde often dwells on the effects of these blurred notions on individuals and society. In his plays, “sin”, or “guilt”, is questioned. Initially, the “guilt” that a character suffers from is not acknowledged by the others; s/he

is known as pure, or virtuous. S/he may, indeed, be a faker who forges one- or more- aspect of his/ her identity. Hence, the motive in these plays is bringing out the real identities, and unveil their true characters. Revelation of truth is Wilde's main concern, and he comments in a letter on the function of comedy as an ending unit as soon as the secret is revealed. It seems clear that he gives importance to (the subjectivity/relativity of) truth in his themes more than the comical impact. The plot reaches to the end when the secret is learnt. The secret fires the action, then its resolution brings it to an end. Surely, Wilde's seek for a life free from outer pressures shows itself in his desire to reveal these secrecies.

In Wilde's "serious" plays, characters, mainly dandies, wisely have the audience to question the subject of moral rules in the society in an ironic manner. In a "serious" action, Mrs. Erlynne cast out of the social circle because of her "wrong" behavior in the past. On the other hand, Lord Darlington gets appreciation for his within the "petty" action he is in. Similar to other dandies in Wilde's plays, Lord Darlington is referred to as "depraved" and "wicked" (I pp. 14-6); however, the audience is not clearly informed on which of his activities prove his depravation or wickedness. The mere implication of wicked thoughts can be the moments when he says immoderate things with delight, but there is not any behavior shown. Lady Windermere is conscious of his situation as well:

Lady Windermere: You are better than most other men, and I sometimes think you pretend to be worse.

Lord Darlington: We all have our little vanities. (I p. 7)

In his following sentences, he gives an explanation of the reason for his stance by saying: "If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism" (I p. 8). Then, he does not seek any attention, or being taken seriously; more, he aims at not being taken seriously. This is a common trait in all Wilde's dandies.

Mrs. Erlynne, the female dandy in the play, opens up a frame of morality which constitutes a true but ironic contrast to Lady Windermere's attitude which is quite conservative, indeed, Puritan. Just like for Lord Darlington, aesthetic delight and pleasures are much more significant than moral values for her. "Goodness" is a delusive quality in men, it belongs to the visible sphere of delusions. She supports this idea as she comments on Lord Augustus in Act II:

“. . . there is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus. Fortunately it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be" (p. 58). In Act IV, we witness more of her thoughts:

I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don't do such things—not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No— what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her. And nothing in the world would induce me to do that. (p.104)

For a dandy, pleasure comes before moral limitations, just as beauty comes before generosity. Although Lady Windermere harshly criticizes these traits, it is Mrs. Erlynne's possession of these traits which renders possible Lady Windermere's recognition, even though at the end of the play. She would not possibly have taken any lesson she had with such strict and unchanging way of thinking. Mrs. Erlynne's statement, "manners before morals" (IV p. 98) has the notion that in some cases, all artificial constructs attributed to morality fade away. How one is obliged to behave in some situations matters more than what her reputation is thought of. A challenging act, it shows that moral conduct can be ignored, or omitted. In other words, it is at stake. She does not volunteer to fall in the gutter just because Lord Windermere wants her to quit seeing them. Still holding on to her lie, she does not seem like regretting. She goes for appearing strong. Because weakness brings about bad dresses and obsolete attitudes. This is not even the last thing she desires to carry on herself.

Mrs. Erlynne is the character who needs to expose the truth in her life in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She is ostracized by the society due to eloping with a man other than her husband and leaving her baby daughter behind. Towards the end of the action, the audience learns that Lady Windermere is the baby she left. This revelation shows that Mrs. Erlynne, once an outcast and disrespected member of society, is actually the mother of an "ideal" female member of society, Lady Windermere. Lady Windermere elaborates on her mother as if she is a holy figure as well. She idealizes her mother. On the other hand, Mrs. Erlynne does not wish to announce her real identity at first, as she thinks the illusions her daughter keeps may be better than the reality. The real Mrs.

Erylne is known to Lord Windermere and the audience, only Lady Windermere is yet unaware. Lady Windermere wants to keep the ideals she has in her mind, because she thinks she would lose all she has if she lost them. So, Mrs. Erylne helps Lady Windermere in keeping her ideal by not exposing the secret, which is hidden till the end of the play.

As an adulterous woman, Mrs. Erylne holds an indisputably significant position with respect to the deconstruction of womanhood in the Victorian society. In his work, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (1981), Tony Tanner states that adultery from female perspective is their effort to create an "anti-contract," to announce the freedom they seek by nature. The act of marriage is always under the threat of adultery. In Rousseau's words, "natural freedom" takes over the social freedom. Unlike the common belief that humanity proceeds from nature to culture, it is quite possible to proceed from culture to nature in this respect. Adultery creates that crack on the socially constructed bondages between two recognized genders. Private space provides the setting for women who commit adultery to defeat the social burden on them. Tanner (1981) asserts that the private sphere in the Victorian novels, for example, pinpoints the industrialized people's yearning for finding back the "formlessness" of a previous status endorsed by freedom. It is possible to claim that Tanner's statement explains why adultery must be understood as a tool of deconstructing the fixed gender identities in Wilde's plays.

In the Victorian period, marriage was of utmost importance, especially to women, in that it opened up the ultimate way to gain social recognition. However, as Frederick Engels argues, "marriage according to the bourgeois conception was a contract, a legal transaction, and the most important one of all because it disposed of two human beings, body and mind, for life " (1884, p. 42). The idea of a monogamous marriage is hypocritical in itself. Primarily, the family is to be remembered "with its specific character of monogamy for the woman only, but not for the man" (Engels, 1884, p. 34). While in the ancient Greece men had the legal right to be involved with polygamy, they still did even after its legal banning in the modern societies. Within the increasing number of families, "adultery became an unavoidable social institution—denounced, severely penalized, but impossible to suppress" (1884, p. 131). Adultery by

women, an absolute violation of honor in the Victorian period, is regarded as “honorable in a man, or, at the worst, a slight moral blemish which he cheerfully bears”. Hence, monogamous marriages have never been “the fruit of individual sex love, with which it had nothing whatever to do; marriages remained as before marriages of convenience. It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property” (1884). The claim on women’s inferiority grows out of the role of reproduction attached to them, together with the construct of family being a part of social economy.

2.2 Gender as a Social Design: Male over Female

Gender roles are the outcome of social compulsions. The role of male sexual desire in defining the frames of sexual relations is a clear example of how gender functions to claim certain traits. For instance, constructed as full of rigid desire, men feel the right to force women to have sex with them. Both women and men continuously generate meanings of sexualities and gender special to places and periods. They “do” their genders as they compare themselves with the society which produces them. In the play, *Duchess of Berwick*, giving a talk on her wish to join the birthday party only if there is no “wicked” people around, says that there have been a lot of scandalous bodies in the society recently (I p. 18). Apparently, she is oversensitive about sexual course – especially when out of marriage. A woman’s bad reputation corrupts herself and others around her, i.e. her family, friends... as she is involved in sexual intercourse. But it is not the same for men. It does not matter when a man’s is renounced notoriously. Another point is that women keep at men just to remind them of their existence, which is quite ironic. Without women walking around and speaking their minds, it is impossible for men to recognize their identities. The way Darlington mocks marriage institution in return is evident; although women try their best to stand as respectful and virtuous in relationships, their husbands still run after other women, so they may happen to “lose” them at any time. Male regulation over the construction of the female both creates an illusion of women fragility and renders the marriage institution invalid at the end. In her book *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in*

Mid-Victorian England (1998), Mary Poovey sheds light on one-sided political, scientific or social developments through time which led to the contradictory description of womanhood in the mid-and-late Victorian period. She criticizes the gender schemes of the Victorian period, arguing against the claim that gender roles are designated by differences between the sexes accepted as “natural”. While adultery by men is ordinary, even necessary at some points, a woman’s adultery brings the end of her social reputation and individual peace. Poovey analyzes the ways the idea of “natural” with respect to genders is weaved within the Victorian bourgeoisie (p. 2). There is a direct parallelism between social classes and the captivity of women both indoors and outdoors.

Mrs. Erlynne is also an implication of the result of male effect on the construction of female sexuality. She is depicted by Lord Windermere as an unfortunate woman who was a respected and honored woman before she lost her good reputation in the society. The sharp contrast between Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne brings to minds the question why female reputation is much more important than male’s. The increase of the concept of “nuclear family” across societies caused a degradation of womanhood and this was not existent within the societies of the previous ages. As Engels points out,

The overthrow of mother right was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. . . . In order to make certain of the wife’s fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights. (1884, pp.30-1)

For Engels, the need for rising classes caused the rise of nuclear families; in this new structure, women were oppressed and directed to preserve the reputation prescribed for them. Otherwise, they were no surprisingly remembered in many notorious ways. Monogamy, furthermore, was not a real reflection of moral values, as these were, for Engels, two totally different spheres: "Marriage according to the bourgeois conception was a contract, a legal transaction, and the most important one of all because it disposed of two human beings, body and mind, for life" (Engels 1884). Monogamy is only a hypocrisy. Monogamous relationships have been related to women, not men, since the early history.

Engels reminds that the ancient Roman and Greek societies rendered polygamy legal for men; even after it was prohibited in many societies, men have been, and still are, living the self-given right of polygamous sexuality. As marriages and families flourished in the forms of economic units, women were overwhelmed due to their reproductive role:

In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to women of managing the household was as much a public, a socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family . . . , a change came . . . The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again—and then, only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties... The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife. (Engels, 1884, p. 39)

A woman who does not fulfill her responsibilities of reproduction, hence, disharmonizes the system and deserves to be labelled by the male rule maker. In the case of Mrs. Erlynne, it was only misfortune that caused her to pay for her actions' results. Though her past is not clearly narrated, her portrayal as a victim of fortune tells much about what divorced or widowed women can undergo during life; looked down on, ostracized. Lord Windermere wants Lady Windermere to invite her to the party in order to help her regain her place in the society. Heavy meanings society loads on Mrs. Erlynne's position prove themselves here. She feels – or is made to feel- accepted by the society as a prerequisite to lead a life under no pressure. On the other hand, Lady Windermere is pretty sure that if she does not let Mrs. Erlynne join her party, she would win the approval of every woman in London. Casting a woman with unclear past and reputation off the society will earn her respect. Mrs. Erlynne implies that she is anxious since women will be more pitiless than men in their criticism towards her, so she wants support from Lord Windermere. This attitude of hers brings forth more anxiety in her environment due to the belief that an “outcast” woman is never to interact with a married man within such frequency. She must be at a certain distance; however, she is not, and she does not exhibit a behavior which could prove her wickedness at any terms. The

portrayal of a wicked female is constantly kept under investigation in relation to the character of Mrs. Erlynne. She embodies the consequences a Victorian woman deviating from the social rules undergo. Similar to what Amy Mandelker asserts with reference to Anna Karenina, Tolstoy's most famous female character with a bad reputation, "her sense of dissonance [even] increases to the extent that she feels alienated from her own identity" at a point (1993, p.61). She is not free to perform as she wishes; when she does, she is forever condemned to a status of moral turpitude.

From a cultural feminist perspective, women are defined being more "dependent" and "obedient", whereas men being more "independent" and "self-reliant" as rooted in their early childhood activities. Considering the fact that people build their gender identity through intrinsic and extrinsic observations in childhood, and by the time they have belief in the stability of that identity, they search for the means of preserving it. They suit their traits to their gender roles while expecting confirmation. A Victorian male, for instance, felt rewarded upon doing male activities. On the other hand, women did not generally have the right to go beyond the limits. If they thrust themselves in husbands' jobs, husbands expected them to step back as that is, no matter what issue it was, none of their business. For Lord Windermere, there is the problem when Lady Windermere secretly checks his accounts since a wife does not have the right to track her husband's transactions (I p. 24). Being checked up on his wife is worse than his confidential actions being revealed.

By the time they are born, boys are urged to be free to act as they wish; perception is such that girls remain clever, while boys may have bad reputation without a need for explanation. Duchess of Berwick expresses her sadness ironically in Act I when she learns Windermere's child is a male, not female. Her claim that men are never good, meaning they are mischievous, have the right to be so. Besides, she contends that the way most men act in marriage, such as having interest in other women while keeping their marriage, can be foreseen, and should be tolerated. Her argument is corroborative of the social establishment of female and male positions. Men go around, then come back to their wives. Being a nagger only escapes the husband as they dislike it. She also implies that women seem pathetic when they cry, and crying is a sign of serious

weakness. The idea that women cry when they feel sad is so deeply inured. Clearly, women and men are made to absorb the gender roles in psychologically different forms due to their different social roles. Historical changes and developments in societal areas make them experience differently. A way of separating human activities and distributing different duties, hence, is to divide the sexes into two and allow them to lead lives in separate spheres. In the play, Lady Windermere seems to be both aware of and disturbed by this difference in the construction of the female and the male. An incident where she demonstrates this is when she feels irritated because of the compliments Lord Darlington pays to her the night before her birthday. For her, men's compliments to women are no more than words they utter without really believing in their meanings: "I don't like compliments, and I don't see why a man should think he is pleasing a woman enormously when he says to her a whole heap of things that he doesn't mean" (I p.7). She seems totally opposed to objectification of women and the language used to denote them.

Indeed, Lady Windermere gives the audience the sense of a fallen woman when she is first seen imagining of eloping with Lord Darlington. She considers living a life outside of the borders drawn for her, leaving motherhood and wifehood. However, Wilde takes her out of the possible conventional progression, as the play does not end by her death, suicide, or victimization. The construct of fallen woman was a type generally used in the literary works of the late nineteenth century as the symbolization of the dangers a woman might go through if she broke the rules. These scenes might have been intriguing for the audience as well. Mrs. Erlynne is obviously closer to the figure of the fallen woman though she is located as neither fallen nor angel as the play proceeds. She gets financial support from Lord Windermere due to the pressure she puts on him, telling she is Lady Windermere's mother. He does not let people speak badly of her, and wants Lady Windermere to give her a place in the party they arrange. Lady Windermere is aware of her image as a disrespectful woman among the society due to the fact that she had been to Lord Darlington's house alone before. She does not care about this public view too much, for repentance, to her, is an old fashioned word (IV p. 94). At the end of the play, though, Mrs. Erlynne experiences happiness. She makes a change in her life by leaving with the man

who wishes to marry her, Lord Augustus. This event must be considered as a breakthrough, because “normally”, it was not imaginable for a “corrupt” woman to marry again and join back to the society she once belonged to (Eltis, 1996, p. 79).

Family life and financial duties gave birth to a number of beliefs, like women’s objectification, their obligation to learn domestic life, or men’s obligation to contribute to the work life and economy in the Victorian period. Because there is not a fixed gender core and gender is not a fact, those who do not “act” in the way genders require bring unsteadiness in them. Society functioned as an organizing organ, preventing resistance and aiming at more steady social affiliations. When gender roles are recognized as the cultural reflection assumed by the sexed human bodies, it becomes impossible to think of sex as separate from gender. In Act I, Lady Windermere shares her observation on Lord Darlington’s being different than the other men. He replies: “Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn’t” (p.8). Darlington’s reference to the good and the bad must be read as the proper and improper traits of genders. He mentions that in order to be accepted to the Society, one has to “pretend to be good”, but he does not have such concerns. Because whom the public sphere takes seriously are products of institutions; namely, fabricated sexual identities in obedience with the rules put by institutions.

People can be chosen for different tasks in the society based on their skills and success in the specific fields. It was claimed in the Victorian period that men’s and women’s physical features were a big determinant of the means gender roles were attached. Men’s greater strength provided more opportunities in jobs that required physical activity. Another example was women’s childbearing, pointing out a strong distinction between two sexes. A further point to be considered was the scale of activities rendered suitable for each sex. Besides, gender, race, ethnic groups they belonged to could be the other effective criteria. Society classified babies and children as "girls and boys," grown-ups as "girls and boys who are ready to get married," and adults as "women and men",

which results in the construction of certain similarities and differences, determining different roles. In this sense, possibilities and limitations women and men encountered during their lives were effectual in their gender identity formation. The assumption that biological varieties put certain limitations on the behaviors of women and men opens up the doors to many culturally possible dictations. Observing these gender constructs is immensely influencing for internalizing the gender roles. In Act I, Lady Windermere's depiction of herself as a desperate woman bound to her marriage life is a reflection of that. Women are bearers of each suffering, and Lady Windermere is no different. Though she feels heartbroken because her husband is reprobating her, she does not have the courage to put an end to her marriage.

Both formal (laws, authoritative regulations, constitution...) and informal (customs, traditions...) institutions shape the traditional gender roles. Body as a "material" holds a significant place in the shaping process. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) assertion that "woman" is not a natural existence but a historical idea shows that sex, which refers to biological facts, and gender, which refers to the cultural symbolization of that fact, are necessarily different. While being "female" does not have any true meaning, being "woman" means forcing the body to fulfill the historically constructed role of women and putting it into an ongoing cultural design. The same reason is valid in casting discrete genders off the society. Those individuals are thought of not being able to perform a specific gender's role properly, so they are punished in every respect. In the Victorian period, for example, the best way to prove a female's womanliness was to join the marriage institution. However, since it seems more like a playground where actors and actresses perform their roles, the veracity of being married is put into question in the play. Cecil ridicules the status of being married by calling it a "game" (II p. 41). Though he is called trivial by Lord Augustus, he does not give importance to this game in which divorce is also possible, despite the fact that people around him do not hold with the same belief. In addition, Lady Plymdale sarcastically states that husband-wife relationships may be problematic when they look fine, and people think the husband beats her in privacy since "the world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life" (II p. 41). Reproduction is

confined in marriage system that is built on heterosexuality, and in turn, humans reproduced in this system are expected to fit in the predetermined gender frames for ensuring the continuity of relationships via marriage when they grow up. So, one can track the performance of gender roles as the device used for continuing blood ties and kinships.

2.3 Parents as Directive to Make Children's Genders

In the Victorian period, children were taught gender differentiation at a very early age. Parents oriented them toward their specified gender roles until they felt sure the children had it. Teachings directed on boys led them to turn to outdoor activities in the public sphere, while girls were provided space to deal with their domestic tools at home. These items and settings helped children digest their gender roles, while learning womanhood or manhood. The result was stock gender figures who followed the paths drawn by their parents, who had already been gendered. Agatha, the daughter of Duchess of Berwick, is the strongest example of a gendered girl. In Act II, the Duchess decides whom her daughter will dance with at the party. Meanwhile, she says: "You dear simple little thing! [Scratches out two names.] No nice girl should ever waltz with such particularly younger sons! It looks so fast!" (II p. 34). She crosses out the names she finds improper, because she finds only Mr. Hopper as the suitable husband for her. Agatha is strictly tied to her mother's apron strings. She also tells Hopper to take good care of her "chatterbox" while Hopper and she is going dancing. Parents' educating their children for appropriate gender positioning is brought to an obvious level. Especially mothers reprimand their children if they perform actions untypical of their gender. Parents approve and show supportive attitude when children act in accordance with the gender expectations. A parent's reaction can easily deter a girl from dealing with "masculine" issues, just as Agatha being prevented from entering a "male" sphere, decision-making.

While the Duchess seriously comments on a trivial issue, that Mr. Hopper might have been influenced by Agatha's "clever talk" in his decision to marry her, she adds finding this interesting. The question to be asked here is; is it interesting that her daughter's talk includes intelligence, or is it that Mr. Hopper is

influenced by cleverness? Also, even though she implies her sadness about the possibility of her daughter's marriage, she says: "I think that a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection" (I p.23). Clearly, the reason behind gender roles having a vast effect is due to the fact that it never ends; we take it to our houses, and all places we are found in. A very substantial characteristics of humanity, reproduction requires considering this. Constantly referring to the opposite sex, marriage, and family becomes an inseparable feature of our daily lives, which makes the gender performances seem like a fundamental determiner of our core identities. People maintain gender beliefs to a large extent around the world.

Purity and innocence, two female traits thought of necessitating male protection, are regularly parodied by Wilde. In the play, he satirizes the Duchess of Berwick and her notions related to marriage. The Duchess is employed by Wilde for the purpose of the true basis of moral values society dotes upon. The Duchess is a mother who intentionally renders her daughter, Agatha, passive and detached just to keep her a suitable candidate for marriage. For instance, before she tells the rumors she knew about Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erylne to Lady Windermere, she wants her daughter to go and watch some photos. The only reply Agatha gives her is "yes mamma" (I p. 17). The superiority Duchess shows on her is a traditional reaction by a Victorian woman. As a mother, she has the responsibility to get her daughter married. She selects a proper candidate for this; the rich Mr. Hopper. She approaches him like a material, a trade good to be used. She emphasizes how significant he is to them and she wished more people like him existed, as life would get easier then (II p. 36). During her conversation with Mr. Hopper, Agatha is the ongoing listener, repeating her vocabulary. An irony here is that the Duchess names her daughter as a "little chatter box" (II p. 37). Bringing the audience face-to-face with the protection women have been exposed to, and the guard position given to men by the parents, Wilde remarks on the fixation of gender roles in the late nineteenth century.

The initial characterization of Lady Windermere can be mentioned as an example of the consequences of overprotection, which is similarly evident in Agatha's behavior. Presumably, obedience and purity were the common traits

they were both instructed on. It is possible to see on the aged Lady Windermere the problems coming forth because of the impositions she formerly experienced in her life. She has to let the perfect idea of her husband in her mind shatter because she thinks he is leading an extramarital relationship. It is this drive that causes her to think of leaving with Lord Darlington. On the parental side, Mrs. Erlynne thinks that Lady Windermere will ruin her life if she leaves her husband since she had ruined hers before. Lady Windermere is “a mere girl”, so she will lose her way in life. She is not the kind of person that has enough strength and capacity to defend her rights in the society. She also has a baby, and has to prepare his future with her husband. How would she account for her departure if that child’s life is ruined, too? These characters are mediators Wilde uses to enforce his deconstructive argument on the link between gender formation and societal impacts.

The critical approach Lady Windermere puts forth at the beginning of the play is connected to a different end at the end of the play within her choice of a traditional concept of womanhood. Lord Darlington offers his love to Lady Windermere and wants her to choose either a totally “free” life or one bound to a “false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands” (II p. 51). Here, the “perfection” attributed to wives turns into negative. Social expectations render her a person she may not indeed be. When she says: “I am afraid of being myself” (II p. 52), she declares her concern about stepping out of the behavioral limits social rules impose on her as a woman. Although she desires to obey what Lord Darlington offers, she hesitates to move throughout the time she waits for him in the house. Soon after, she decides that she is mistaken and must return home. Also, Mrs. Erlynne arrives in and becomes effective in stopping her. She makes Lady Windermere sure that she would destroy her peaceful life if she went for Lord Darlington’s offer. Her statements like “the wife’s duty to her husband”, “the horror of being an outcast”, or “the mother’s duty to her child” are quite influencing in her decision. Hence, Lady Windermere makes up her mind and returns to her husband. Though the end of this story seemingly emphasizes the conventional notion that a woman, especially when a mother, is bound to live with her husband in her house, it should be read in the way of recognizing the power society embraces

sexualities. However, recognition of social power is no way equal to the assertion of its reliability or validity.

2.4 Revelation of Gender Constructions via Marriage

Patriarchal societies define women as “others”, subordinate figures by undervaluing them and creating distinct boundaries between the subordinated and themselves. A common example is men constructing women as vulnerable and separate, by presenting protection and politeness. Mrs. Erlynne stands as the exceptional character in this respect. Lord Augustus praises her wit, while stating that it is barely possible to encounter a woman whose comprehension is strong. The fact that they end up with marriage is due to Wilde’s integrating the unconventional into the conventional in order to destroy the taught morals. In a scene where women are ostensibly divided into good and wicked, Cecil mockingly states that good ones are boring, whereas wicked ones cause trouble (III p. 78). By women being good, he emphasizes how boring they can be as their manners are straight and clear to identify. The world is full of them. Middle class society is dominated by them, and people are supposed to know how to contact with them. They are known as innocent and pure; however, these features are so useless and pointless. Mrs. Erlynne, hence, is not within these borders mentioned. In another scene where Lady Windermere feels ashamed upon realizing Mrs. Erlynne put her own reputation under risk for saving hers and lied about the fan found in Lord Augustus’s place, she seems to take an ironic lesson; she scrutinizes how people label women as either good or bad in cold blood. Being biased is typical of most individuals within the society.

The effort to get a value, a status, or a possession back should be noticed as the continuity of the theme of “secret” carried out in Wilde’s plays. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is an example for that in terms of Mrs. Erlynne’s trial on gaining her previous position back in the society. She uses Lord Windermere’s financial status and career for that. Dumby’s reference to women as being “Awfully commercial . . . nowadays. Our grandmothers threw their caps over the mills, of course, but, by Jove, their granddaughters only throw their caps over mills that can raise the wind for them” (III p. 78) is said upon that. Absorbed with the same idea, Lord Darlington, although fallen in love with

Lady Windermere, speaks out, "Most women . . . nowadays, are rather mercenary" (I p. 12). Mrs. Erlynne may be feeling indebted to society and has the need to compensate for it when she says, "One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays" (III p. 72). Her basic expectation afterwards is dissolving the misperception about herself with the support of Lord Windermere. Also, Lady Windermere sees herself in debt against Mrs. Erlynne because she feels that she owes everything she has to her. Mrs. Erlynne's answer to her is that she had already paid it with silence, which is the ultimate way of payment. So, a mistaken behavior, either regarded as sin (Mrs. Erlynne's) or a "carelessness" like Lady Windermere's thoughts requires a debt to be paid off in the end. It can be argued that Wilde presents the concept of debt, normally a financial matter, as a re-interpretation of a woman's moral atonement. Like in finance, if a person pays his/her debt to society, s/he is set free from the bad reputation put on him/her.

Lady Windermere's Fan introduces Lord Windermere as the ideal husband whom other men take example. His sensitivity to moral behavior separates him. In various conversations, he is mentioned as a man different from all the others in the city. Lady Windermere's false assumption that he leads a relationship with Mrs. Erlynne causes him to fall from Lady Windermere's grace and gives her a deep pain, as she holds him as an idol above every men. On the other hand, Cecil offers Lord Windermere to play cards only to get a refusal, which causes Dumby to criticize marriage in that it passivates men. It's both costly and dispiriting. Besides, women want to shape men into virtuous forms, but once men become good, they cease to love them further. Being virtuous means being boring at the same time (III p.81). A similar requirement in getting into a certain shape within marriage life concerns women as well. Regarding women, Mrs. Erlynne asserts the claim to her daughter that a woman must not leave her marriage even if she is treated badly, cheated, or left by the husband. She owns that child, and is forever bound to lead that marriage. She has experienced more than a "typical" Victorian woman has: "I may have wrecked my own life, but I will not let you wreck yours. You- -why, you are a mere girl, you would be lost. You haven't got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage" (Act III p. 72). As seen, gender

perceptions is directly linked with is the phenomena called “structure”, and its historical construction and current production may proceed in separate but unequal ways.

In the Victorian period, following the separation of public and private spheres in the society, male domination excluded the female from public domains and labelled them as existing in a ceaselessly inferior condition. On the other hand, the male domain had close links to the female domain, which involved a limited range of household activities, due to motherhood since the person who is expected to protect the female domain from the dangers of the public domain was the male. Male success here was being determined by the private domain. Such a differentiation between the male and the female brought a noticeable sameness among men; they were all “whiskered, wearing the same type of top hat or bowler, clad in black or grey suits or overcoats, wearing the same kind of waistcoat and tie” (Schneider, 2011, p. 148). An inevitable pressure on the fulfilment of masculinity determined how the male performance would be conducted until the end of the late Victorian period. A disruption in the continuity of male flow, in other words, the peril of being affected by “either repression or an unfocused, and so unproductive, externalization” (Booth, 1995, p. 120), had to be prevented. The emerging middle-class males who incorporated this ideal manhood worked to expel the ones remaining outside the borders, such as lesbians and homosexuals. Both male effeminacy and female masculinity were referred to as illnesses by medical scientists (Brady, 2009, pp. 179-82). In spite of this prevalent denunciation, people in favor of these unaccepted gender traits argued against the dogmatic masculinity of the Victorian society and they constantly demonstrated their sexually unusual aspects. Decadence equaled to deterioration in the society.

In such an environment of hypocrisy, the dandy lives on his own motivation. As Barbey d’Aurevilly declares, a dandy is not “a caricature” or “a suit clothes walking about by itself”; rather, he is “social, human and intellectual” (1897, p. 18). Critical of the two-facedness of his society, he exists as a member of it at the same time. He performs and mocks the gender traits which are socially deemed far from him. The way he expresses his own understanding of norms is an open rebellion against the Victorian class structures, gender patterns, and

material love. A revolt against male uniformness, the dandy prioritizes individual living and draws focus away from the social definitions (Glick, 2001). That he always plays with the deceitful means through which the society teaches genders makes him a significant actor in defying the gender roles.

Dandies in Wilde's works have the most significant remarks about utilization of the gender norms in social life. Prevalent conceptualization of gender status and marriage in the late Victorian period is put into question in numerous cases. Wilde's dandies can be described as individuals of intelligence who are into philosophical questionings. They would liberate themselves from traces of suffering, anxiousness, or pain. Indeed, they try their best to remain far from any worrying or painful activity without denying their existence. Such a character would surely suit Wilde's desire in that the essential activity the dandy did would be to detach himself from all constructs of the social world and reveal the discrepancies that superficial life would impose on the individuals. In the third act, a conversation goes on among the male characters of the play in Lord Darlington's house, regarding women in general, and Mrs. Erlynne. Here, the most noteworthy dandy figure is Cecil Graham. He states that "good" women are dull to him, so he wishes for the bad ones. His view on morality is highly remarkable: "A man who moralizes is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralizes is invariably plain" (III p. 80). As for the "bad" attitudes of men in the society, he shows women responsible. He also mentions the process of social change men have gone through in time, this time putting the blame on the society. For Graham, women go for men who claim themselves to show good manners. By the time a man is not good, woman will desire to transform him into good. However, they are not eligible when they are already good. As they start demonstrating good manners to women, they lose attraction and are left. The same is valid for women; when they are good, men quit loving them. Graham says, "They like to find us quite irretrievably bad, and to leave us quite unattractively good" (III p. 81). Here, the deception people reflect to each other in their roles as women or men is clearly criticized by Wilde. One can estimate from Graham's statements that women, like men, incline to get in affair with "bad" ones, even though in privacy. The matter of the fact is, "immoral" acts are cast out in society; hence, such acts of desire, or any act considered as a

character “flaw” or “vulnerability” were almost impossible, especially for men, to show in publicity.

With his speeches, Lord Darlington appears to be another dandy in the play. However, in actuality, he desires to lead a life within a traditional structure. He is more like a dandy of his own kind at the start of the play. He mostly prefers uttering “silly” things in Lady Windermere’s words (I p. 9), ignoring the seriousness around him. For instance, he criticizes Lady Windermere on her strict belief that mistakes made in life cannot be disregarded. He does not hold strict beliefs on whether people are good or evil, either. Instead, he views whole life and everything in it, including marriage, as a game. For him, this game is even getting out of date. He gets criticism from the other characters in terms of being not serious enough. He replies to it by stating this feature to be a “little vanity” he has (p. 14). Lady Windermere, being unsure of her husband’s loyalty for her, is soothed by his remarks. Actually, he desires Lady Windermere for himself, so he has different options in his mind to offer. For this reason, he points out the problems in her marriage and want her to pick her own way in life. Lady Windermere’s pure and naïve attitude attracts him and he probably wants to share these features on a common basis with her. He seems to accept that he got far from the purity he was taught long before, and at this point he says, “all men are in the gutter, but some of them are looking at the stars” (III p. 82) which might also be read as a hopeful wish to look through some perspectives other than social dogmas require us to. One should also note here that if Lady Windermere had listened to his words and left home, she could have been one of those who have “lost” purity. So, what he expects Lady Windermere to do is an act that would take her out of the borders drawn for her sex. Wilde makes another challenge here.

As previously mentioned, Mrs. Erylnne is the main female dandy in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. As a male, Lord Darlington does not seem to be as effectual as she does in the way society sees “fallen” women. Especially at the point where Mrs. Erylnne warned and prevented her from taking an action similar to the one she herself did twenty years ago, Lady Windermere starts viewing Mrs. Erylnne from another perspective. This act makes Mrs. Erylnne a big-hearted woman in her eyes. At the play’s end Lady Windermere tells her husband:

I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don't think Mrs. Erlynne a bad woman—I know she's not. (IV p. 94)

Not only Lady Windermere but also Lord Windermere undergo a change in his feeling for Mrs. Erlynne after recognizing her presence in Lord Darlington's room. The way he describes her resembles the words Lady Windermere has used with the influence of her previous thoughts:

. . . I thought Mrs. Erlynne was a woman more sinned against than sinning, as the phrase goes. I thought she wanted to be good, to get back into a place that she had lost by a moment's folly, to lead again a decent life. I believed what she told me—I was mistaken in her. She is bad—as bad as a woman can be. (IV p. 93)

The play uses dandyism to question and deconstruct the gender roles and the consequences they bring about, such as matrimony. The Duchess of Berwick, who can be regarded as another female dandy in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, comments on matrimony as a type of link made by legal regulations. She states, “Our husbands would really forget our existence if we didn't nag at them from time to time, just to remind them that we have a perfect legal right to do so” (I p. 15). Also, Lady Plymdale, a woman of London high society, ridicules the meanings people attribute to marriage. Lord Windermere's attempt to take part next to his wife in the birthday party comes to her notice, and she cynically states: “Oh, you mustn't dream of such a thing. It's most dangerous nowadays for a husband to pay any attention to his wife in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when they are alone. The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life” (II p. 41). She thinks that in order for a marriage to be joyful, some “extracurricular” practices have to be done. She also speaks of her own husband, mocking his recent attitudes: “He has been so attentive lately that he has become a perfect nuisance!” She tells others that she would let him give more than enough attention to another woman in the party as long as the woman desires, too; and this situation would not disturb her. Indeed, she thinks, these women “form the basis of other people's marriages” (II p. 48).

On the contrary, Lady Windermere's complaint is exactly the same as this confusion Lady Plymdale humorously states. But Mrs. Erlynne makes Lady Windermere attain a very different result related to the essence of marriage. Marriage is not welcomed by the female dandies of Wilde's other plays, either. For instance, in *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Marchmont, similar to the Duchess of Berwick, exposes that she is not really after the idea of ever-faithfulness in marriage, because "[their] husbands never appreciate anything in [them]. [They] have to go to others for that!" (I p. 25). Her paradox regarding marriage is evident: "We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it" (I p. 26). Male dandies are not more enthusiastic about marriage than the female ones. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Dumby says that marriage is a malign pursuit: "Good heavens. How marriage ruins a man! It's as demoralising as cigarettes, and far more expensive" (III p. 81).

Also, the "serious" perspective towards marriage finds ironic correspondences. Funny characters of the tiny plots are helpful in this respect. For instance, as Agatha gives the constant answer, "yes, mamma", to all her mother's questions, this continually becomes a moment of humor during the action. While Mr. Hopper proposes to her, this answer turns into a profitable position for his sake:

Duchess of Berwick: Agatha, darling! (Beckons her over.)

Lady Agatha: Yes, mamma.'

Duchess of Berwick (aside): Did Mr. Hopper definitely—

Lady Agatha: Yes, mamma.

Duchess of Berwick: And what answer did you give him, dear child?

Lady Agatha: Yes, mamma.

Duchess of Berwick (affectionately): My dear one! You always say the right thing. (II p. 54)

Clearly, Wilde handles the matter of class linkages in selection of candidates for marriage, specifically when the marriages are to be profit-based. Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere's Fan* lays criticism on the insincerity of class relations, so she reminds us of Lady Bracknell in this respect. She dislikes the tea she drinks in the house she visits, and says that the tea is undrinkable, adding that the son-in-law of the host "supplies" it (I p. 14). Here, she stresses a disgust towards the theme of trade. Still, her disgust of trade and financial bonds disappears when it comes to get her daughter married to a rich husband.

Mr. Hopper, the candidate for the Duchess' daughter, is deemed despicable both because he is a tradesman and because he is from Australia. Despite these "negative" characteristics, the Duchess reminds that his father is the owner of a great fortune due to the sales of some sorts of food. The Duchess underrates the host's son-in-law because she thinks he has been a spoilt man by the time he got married to the daughter of the host. However, her oversensitivity in class differences fades away as she starts desiring her own daughter to get married to the rich tradesman Mr. Hopper. Wilde's point here is that marriage for huge financial riches is the ultimate goal gender roles direct women and men to reach, class sensitive behaviors may easily disappear, and some relationships which have normally been labeled as improbable can turn into probable fast, just as the duchess's definition of the food Mr. Hopper trades changing into "most palatable".

As opposed to the popular perception of aristocracy, which asserts that upper class people are to become role models for people of the other classes, Wilde's idea of aristocrats is based on their falsity and corruptness. Wilde's satirical schematizing of the upper class works best to bring forth the two-faced attitudes they have despite their alleged kindness. These behaviors prove themselves obvious in socially prominent events, such as marriages and courtships. The Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere's Fan* dislikes men in general and wants Lady Windermere to believe in the possibility that Lord Windermere is in a relationship with somebody else. Then, in a belittling way, she suggest Lady Windermere not take unfaithfulness too seriously, referring to the opinion that in world such things are common and normal. Although Lady Windermere purely objects to her by stating love made her marry, the Duchess tells that is how it begins. She tries to claim that even if the initial drives of marriage are emotion based, they turn into financial interest in the following period. Again, Lady Plymdale in the same play has a secret relationship. She is anxious about her husband's discovery of this affair; therefore, she tries to employ a woman to tempt him in order for him to focus on his own business and not realize what his wife is going through. Surely, these women, the Duchess of Berwick and Lady Plymdale, married because it was the appropriate thing to do, both socially and financially. Now, they are distressed. It seems that the husbands, as well as

these women, take the position of love in marriage for granted, so they can commit adultery without hesitation.

For Wilde, marriage, like many social acts, is not an issue to be taken seriously. He approaches marriage as it is a petty institution which remains far from any trace of romantic pattern. It does not save anyone from anything. Marrying is only a frequent activity people perform, and it has been fashionable once. Viewing it as no more than a dogmatic event imposed on genders, Wilde does not feel sympathy for marriages for financial reasons in any case. People marrying for benefitting from each other's money are not only fools but also liars who have to be explicitly uncovered and let down. These kind of marriages are only validated by the society, he assumes, and for this reason they are meaningless and empty. We can see the reflection of this idea in many of his plays. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, Mrs. Erlynne is held in disrespect by her environment due to her desire to make a mercenary marriage. Lord Augustus is a good candidate for her to entrap in this respect, as he is both rich and foolish. She says that she finds a number of good things in him, adding, "Fortunately it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be" (II p. 58). Erlynne's appraisal of Lord Augustus' suitability for marriage is a whole mockery of the conventional attitude towards the importance of marriage and its necessity. He has good features, and they are all on the surface. This can be read in two ways: they are all visible because he displays them all, or all those manners have surface value, seen but below their meanings are only attributed by other people, the society.

Indeed, love on its own is not a redeeming element for Wilde's characters; an outer rescuer comes in to help. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring's revealing Mrs. Cheveley's true aims is an example to that. On the other hand, idealizing the partner is a common trait every character dwells in. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, characters are so busy with thinking of each other in their own ideal terms. Lord Windermere hides the secret of Mrs. Erlynne being Lady Windermere's mother, like Lady Windermere hides from him that she was going to elope with Lord Darlington and leave the house. This idealization, at one point romanticizing, makes the couple maintain the image they have for each other in

their minds, and just as the Chilterns do, they establish their relationship on a collection of lies.

Victorian audience liked seeing certain themes such as endless love, mutual devotion, fidelity, and “perfect” marriage on the stage, and Wilde held a satirical approach to all these. Instead of focusing on the effect of external conditions on how a marriage proceeds, he is interested in the ingredients of the marriage institution itself. Many parts of his scripts, including the parts he mockingly introduces the society’s attitude towards single mothers and how these mothers perceive themselves, show why he views marriage as a construct set upon people by the society. Wilde draws the portrait of the confusions of mothers who are unmarried, as well as of married mothers who have disinterested husbands and of widows. Especially mothers who are unmarried, as we call “single mothers” in the modern age, are openly discussed. The late nineteenth century society regarded the children of these mothers as illicit. However, Wilde approaches these women with a warm and affectionate attitude. He does not portrait these mothers as “heroines” who have to stand on their own feet in order to look after their children, either. They may have wealth rooted in their families, or they may be rich themselves. They do not generally suffer from serious financial lack. His representations concerning these unwed mothers are pretty advanced. Wendell Stacy Johnson in “Fallen Women, Lost Children: Wilde and the Theatre of the Nineties,” mentions that

Wilde has made of the fallen woman and her child not something trivial, not a ridiculous vehicle for irresponsible paradox, any more than he used the subject to exploit sensational and pathetic possibilities... He is recording an actual world, a strictly limited society, with its falsehoods and pretenses and, in spite of everything, its comic possibilities. . . . (203)

In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs. Erlynne is recognized to be the real focus within the flow of events. She forsakes her own life preferences and happiness in order not to have her children renowned as “illicit”. For this reason, she leaves them when they were babies. This act led to the consequence that she could not see them throughout their lives again, an unfortunate event unlike that of many married-but-alone mothers, or widows. This situation, in which she suffered by missing a baby she could not learn anything about and feeling ashamed of herself, makes the audience feel tenderness towards her. Here Wilde

aims to disrupt the widespread social belief that women commit sinful behavior when they fall in love and act on it, even if the men whom they loved forsake them. In Lady Windermere's case, Mrs. Erlynne does not allow her to elope with a man who is renowned as a womanizer, and so saves her family union. Following this, her true identity as Lady Windermere's mother is revealed, and she gains acceptance, forgiveness and appreciation. After this shocking information, Lady Windermere quits her beliefs, which the society also holds in common, about the women with "ill reputation". She also starts feeling sympathy towards old women more. Mrs. Erlynne attracts the eye as an extraordinary single mother. At first sight, she is thought of as a typical comedy of manners character who is witty. On the other hand, she is critical of the values and has strength to a serious degree, which makes her a female dandy. She is a sound and clear-headed character. Wilde probably wants the audience to feel surprised at her way of secrecy in her plan; besides, he aims to attract us to her cleverness, wit, and her ultimate achievement. To illustrate, although she owns a past with ups and downs concerning her social position, she makes it at last and finds a man to marry, so refreshes her status among people. She is ready to declare untrue statements to this end. Her perspicacity during the maintenance of her plans and soundness while inactivating the external people and causes in the meantime is worth considering.

In the late Victorian period, if a woman was called "fallen", she was considered as no less than prostitutes. Beside this, although Wilde portrays Mrs. Erlynne as a "fallen" woman with an affectionate heart, he does not refrain from emphasizing the important detail: she blackmails Lord Windermere and uses her own daughter's name in order to regain her social reputation. By the time she meets her daughter, she loses her ambition to elevate herself within the upper class, and remembers her motherhood. More, she is ready to give up her chances of acquiring a huge wealth. Owing to her, Lady Windermere avoids leaving her settlement and making a mistake similar to the one which devastated her mother's life. In the following dialogues, she strives to convince Lady Windermere of holding on to her child's care even if her husband gets light headed towards her. She asserts: "If he [Lord Windermere] was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your

child. If he abandoned you your place is with your child” (III p. 73). Cynically enough, she ends up with reaching her goals she planned at the beginning: marriage based on riches and a husband she can direct as she wishes. In order to reach happiness, she marries again. While striving to attain her previous position in the society, she rescues her daughter’s marriage-in-danger, keeping her name away from getting stained. This act is surely one that the audience is content when seeing on the stage. As Johnson puts forth, “at the end she wins Lord Augustus and worldly status, not only to save a comedy but also to display a truth [that]...natural generosity (the unsentimental essence of a mother’s love) or good sense, which is learned...[is] a matter of wit in the two and ultimately identical senses of wisdom and style. Mother knows best” (cited in Cox (ed.), 1984). In some parts, the audience might feel that Mrs. Erlynne is almost about to put away her plans of becoming wealthy as a remarried, respected woman, and try to get herself a place in her daughter’s family in order to become a member of a happily-ever-after. However, this is not the situation. She is insistent on her achieving her aims. She should be noted as both the constant nonconformist individual and the embodiment of the idiotic expectations society holds over people in this sense. Though she attains the possessions she has been longing for at the end of the play, fate shows off one more time and she is required to desert her daughter again. In this way, she must lose the trace of her grandson. Starting out as a wicked woman, she ends the play as an innocent woman with virtuous deeds behind. Among many others, this incident is merely one instance where Wilde works on the ill thoughts the audience had been carrying about a character up to the final scene. Similarly, in *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Chiltern and the audience believes almost until the end of the action that Sir Chiltern is cheating on her. It is understood in the later scenes that the woman whom everybody believes to be the “bad” woman is not having an affair with Sir Chiltern, but she is a deceiver on other issues. Mrs. Erlynne proves to be sexually pure in this setting. Here, Wilde makes sure the audience is freed from judging people through social dogmas just the way Lady Windermere did. He issues the idea that what we see is not, or does not always have to be, the reality. Wilde may be justifying her purity and angelic attitudes in the eyes of the public when he not only appreciates but also penalizes her. She gains an important place this way. The reason he punishes her is that she was initially

after her own selfish profits. In grief, she embraces her lost family only to lose it back shortly. For Wilde, Mrs. Erlynne can be a medium to discuss the possibilities which a socially outcast woman may come across. Purity, goodness, virtue stamped on the females – these are to be undermined so that society wash its hands off from stabilizing the gender traits.

In Wilde's characterization, even though a character holds strict and obviously stable beliefs about fallen figures, women, to say, of the society in a Puritan way, they come to the conclusion of empathizing by the time they witness the true occasions beneath them. The same characters are generally recognized with their previous arrogance in terms of supporting those ideas in an unflinching manner. Avoiding all judgments to be put on people, especially on women so hard, must be the lesson they are expected to take. Their ideas change on not only micro but also macro level; they quit their old firm beliefs on certain social divisions. Lady Windermere concludes in this respect: "I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have... mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin" (IV p. 94).

The fact that those young and proud characters face the possibility of two-facedness of the identities offered to us brings out the true irony. They become aware that they had been keeping false judgments concerning single mothers. People, as well as life, do not consist of two edges- right or wrong, light or dark, black or white. Dividing people into binaries is not a possible thing to do, so is it not in gender identities. Those "dirty" characters, "as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice" (IV p. 94). The point Wilde wants the audience to achieve is clear in the last scene of the play: "There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice" (IV p. 113).

This act of forgiveness is supposed to spread through the audience's harsh perspective concerning these unmarried women. Since so many ages, including the nineteenth century, when a woman gave birth to a child without a father by their side, society never indulged in a possibility of accepting these children,

along with the mother. For Johnson (cited in Cox. (ed.),1984), “disaster, which threatens women who too openly break the sexual code in the Victorian drama, is the disaster of not being received in the best houses. But what they may fear more is that decent society will exclude their children” (p. 197). As Lady Windermere’s hidden mother, Mrs. Erlynne makes her acknowledge that she would take the necessary actions to regain a better position in the society. On the other hand, Lord Windermere asserts that Mrs. Erlynne must hide the secrecy of motherhood from her daughter, because even though Lady Windermere starts to feel warmth towards Mrs. Erlynne now, she would be devastated to learn she was born as an illegitimate baby. Actually, the ignorance Lady Windermere compulsorily holds in this situation is the way to her happiness, in both individual and marriage life. She continues to belong to the fancy society due to the fact that she is kept away from the secret of having a single mother.

As the time of admitting the mistaken thoughts they held on the unmarried mothers comes, the young characters exhibit visibly ironic behaviors. The lesson they ultimately take is such: life does not merely consist of two edges; good or bad, black or white. It is not possible to create binaries out of people’s experiences, preferences, or expectations. Once strictly advocating that all lies must be punished, Lady Windermere reaches to the point of lying in order to maintain the welfare of her mother, whom she once spoke of as evil. Her final statement on Mrs. Erlynne is that Mrs. Erlynne is a better person than she is (IV p. 114). Instead of magnifying innocent and angelic women figures, Wilde praises the goodness found in a “fallen” character such as Mrs. Erlynne. It is not the usurpation of a gendered identity but the projection of a good or bad personality trait that ought to define a person’s position within society. Mrs. Erlynne really wants to keep Lady Windermere safe. She is aware of the perils awaiting her daughter after the possible escape. However, her daughter had always been allegedly conscious of her thoughts and actions, and was holding the illusionary belief that she would not become a “wicked” woman at any time in her private life. This may be thought as conceit, or hypocrisy in a sense. Wilde surely demonstrates the impossibility- and falsity- of creating sharp divisions of goodness and badness while he juxtaposes the locations owned by

the “moral” and “immoral” characters. Details matter and cannot be disregarded.

In addition to the issue of unmarried mothers, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is critical of the issue of social conformism and the extra attention paid to it. This excessive dependence on exhibiting oneself in accordance with the social norms ultimately brings harm. As Mrs. Erlynne does not introduce her true identity, Lady Windermere presumes she is having an affair with her husband. She is even ready to release her naive and respected identity after her belief concerning her husband's secret relationship. Wilde is quite deliberate in exhibiting the double standards in gender identities crafted by the environment: Women must show the utmost care in protecting their dignity and must be paid for any vice they commit. Also, men are under pressure in various points. Therein lies a paradox because “aristocratic women police the sexual double-standard which makes Mrs. Erlynne unacceptable, and Lord Darlington, ‘a charming wicked creature!’” (Sammells, 2000). Although women from the upper class rebuke and criticize the undisciplined men such as Lord Darlington, or Algernon and Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest* because they are not trustable, they still accept them to their social events, in spite of the risk of gaining bad reputation for that. This is another act by Wilde where he conveys the message of getting the binaries together. All these aristocrats, who announce themselves as representatives of the most suitable in all terms, seek for interactions with these rogue men. As a woman of honor, Lady Windermere does not find Lord Darlington's explicit style of flirting suitable, but on Lord Darlington's part, she would appreciate a flirtation full of allusions and signals. Just before she steps to elope with him, she comes to the realization of the conflict between her perception of herself and who she really is. She gets out of the borderline; the rules of properness. Similarly, she sees that Mrs. Erlynne is not “wicked”, or “fallen”, as she presumed.

Another mother, The Duchess of Berwick, appears without any assistance from her husband in the play. Lord Berwick leaves her alone in matching their daughter with a perfect husband. The “end of the season” comes, and the mother is obliged to do it by herself. She is one of Wilde's satirized figures with respect to her attitudes like a mother of high society. Her daughter, on the other hand, is

a satirical representation of a young girl who experiences entering into the society for the very first time. The Duchess definitely views marriage as a financial deal, a contract mostly based on the mercenary tasks to be realized by Mr. Hopper, her daughter's husband-to-be with a fortune. She feels she completed the essential duty of finding the relevant match for her daughter, and then indifferently says to Lady Windermere that it is not the "love at first sight, but love at the end of the season, which is so much more satisfactory" (II p. 55). She also anticipates rumoring with Lady Windermere about the alleged secret relationship between Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere's husband. She does not win the audience's hearts with such haggish behaviors. Despite this, she reaches her aims in the final scene, as she arranges the engagement of her daughter to Mr. Hopper. Only in this moment does Lord Berwick have to come around; Mr. Hopper will get the "consent" to take the ceremony to the official point, and most probably, the two men will discuss the mercenary issues concerning the marriage preparations, and the process that follows. The Duchess alone cannot publicly be taken seriously to solve the financial details out, so her husband's "legal" intervention is needed. Though it is certain that her husband is behaviorally absent in the marriage, he is expected to be the family's opening door to the society.

The degree to which women are given importance is signalled by the place where men stand in the play. Men own the career and power as expected in reality; however, in accordance with the play's purpose, they are recognized with respect to their connection with women. Lord Windermere is Lady Windermere's father-like husband. Lord Darlington feels a deep love for her. Lord Augustus is the man Mrs. Erlynne fools. Even if there are hints that these male figures have superior identity features, we are not informed on them. Other male figures, Hopper, Graham and Dumby, reveal their excessive concern on women even though they speak of them in a disrespectful manner. After depicting Mrs. Erlynne to Lady Plymdale as "an edition de luxe of a wicked French novel" (II p. 70), his intention is understood soon; he actually likes to deflect Lady Plymdale's dissatisfaction. Mrs. Erlynne assumes that he is afraid of Lady Plymdale; and Lady Plymdale is found out to be an envious woman he never even thinks of defying. The majority of what men think and decide on is

connected to women in a way. It is no surprising that these men speak mostly of the power they are exposed to by the females. By the time they are alone, they constantly criticize the tyranny they witness from the women by comparing the womanly traits with the manly ones; when they are with them, they flirt within the rules of coupling. Lord Darlington acts as the “extravagant silly” lover besides Lady Windermere while emphasizing how devoted he feels to her: “I wish I had known it was your birthday, Lady Windermere. I would have covered the whole street in front of your house with flowers for you to walk on. They are made for you” (I p.4).

Wilde locates women at a central position for the sake of subverting their naturalized lives and behaviors. He uses the motherhood symbol for that, an iconic representation within his society. He does not start by inverting this icon in an explicit manner; rather, he initially takes the reversed image of womanhood, the fallen woman. It is probably due to the popularity of the theme of fallen woman that there has been expected a crisis, and following that, a resolution where the wickedness of the woman is linked to a man in her life, most probably, her husband. The concept of pure wife is a focus here as it is explanatory to the subtitle of the play, “about a good woman”. Yet, Mrs. Erlynne appears on the stage through identification with gossips, flirts and the like afterwards. Hence, does the play take the victim wifhood or wicked womanhood to the center? As the action proceeds, this unclear division of themes leaves its place to the blurred identification of “woman”; who is called “good”, who is “bad”?

Meanwhile, Wilde makes sure the play remains loyal to the narrative features of the society plays in his time by employing the character types and events found in these works. He gets use of elements from the British melodrama, French boulevard drama and the concept of well-made play. British melodrama contributes to the play with the character of young and chaste woman whose peace is jeopardized by another character reaching from her past; boulevard drama, with the abundance of misjudgments between husband and wife; and well-made play, with the neat plot structure. An example to the former well-made plays can be Victorien Sardou’s *Les Pattes des Mouches* (1860), whose translation is *A Scrap of Paper*. Similar to *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, this play

includes a scene where a young wife appears in the room of a single man, and is seen by her jealous husband. She feels the need to hide, and leaves a token, like the fan in *Lady Windermere*; afterwards, similar to Mrs. Erlynne, she suffers the results of her self-sacrifice. In another well-made play, *The Glass of Fashion* (1883) by Sydney Grundy, the female protagonist is saved from an indecent situation with the help of another woman. Such structures in plot present a defined, clear argument in morality; more, they draw the borders of the good, who changes into an unkind one due to painful experiences, and the bad, who takes lessons and makes up his/her mind into peace.

Not exactly the common dramatic theme of contradiction between the good and the bad, the play removes the chances of clear-cut distinctions between proper and improper gender traits. Wilde earns Mrs. Erlynne a considerable degree of power that first unsettles, and later, cures; hence, the path she follows on being a woman is not parallelized with the moral standards. It is not possible to deny the vices social circle loads on to Mrs. Erlynne. She is allowed to be built up via many coats each of which reveal her contrast with his daughter. Prior to Mrs. Erlynne's entrance to the stage, *Lady Windermere* is informed that she is a woman who contains more than a single type of morality in herself.

Even though Wilde borrowed from these elements to initiate the play's elements, he aimed an alternate angle within the meanings the play launched. Under the roof of the well-made play, he gave way to psychological perceptions and moral presumptions different from a well-made play's. In appearance, the play's only feature separating it from the mainstream drama was its witty conversations. On the contrary, even his portrayal of the superficial stock characters was full with their deconstruction. Wilde exceeded the mere conversion of his characters. As a self-sacrificing mother, Mrs. Erlynne shows her love for her daughter, but she also rejects quitting her compromised ideals and lets marriage vindicate her in a mild but parodical manner. The opposition to conventions Mrs. Erlynne displayed was new and irritating in that it pointed out how limited social preferences for women were. Mona Caird (1897) criticized the standard labeling onto the world of women as such: "Duty or sin: stern, strict, savage, intolerable duty, or black, polluting, unforgivable sin! These are the women's alternatives!". The construct of the fallen woman in the

plays was a support to these options provided for the female. By the time a woman is renowned as fallen, she is compelled to behave in one of the ways mentioned by Mrs. Erlynne: "to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels" (IV p. 167). Wilde converts how a fallen woman is constructed within the society by presenting Mrs. Erlynne as a woman who commits good actions without departing from her bad line. This subversion was not merely an alternative to the fallen woman construct but also an invasion of the valid gender system as well as the dramatic framework. Still, one cannot assert that the audience grasped the messages under the plot. Wilde might even have hidden Mrs. Erlynne's true identity as Lady Windermere's mother till the end of the play, causing the audience to believe that she is one fallen woman. Wilde's strategy here might be putting a certain distance between Mrs. Erlynne and the audience and reconstituting an alternative way of judgment separate from the formulations they generally depended on. Hence, by having a common dramatic theme tracked with uncommon and slippery signs, Wilde deconstructs a structure and causes his audience to make queries out of their expectations.

The structure of the character of the fallen woman was interesting enough; however, critical view towards Wilde also asserted that the product had been a sensational one rather than challenging. Some critics ignored Mrs. Erlynne, referring to her as a tiring confusion. Journalists of *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, evaluated this detortion of dramatic themes as a fault due to the fact that the audience could not decide if the character is good or bad. Even the costumes added to this ambiguity. Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell denote that in the first staging of the play, Mrs. Erlynne appeared in a white gown at the ball scene, which symbolized innocence; nevertheless, the fabric of the gown seemed to make a "snake-like sheen" when the lights hit on it. In addition, Wilde maintains confusion in the audience's minds by breaking the directions he has established himself. Ian Small reminds that "motifs such as gardens . . . at various dramatic moments within the same play can denote either innocence or corruption, or on occasions, both" (1991, p.115). Wilde keeps the audience surprised at all times. The delayed enlightenment with respect to Mrs. Erlynne's identity causes their dissatisfaction, even frustration. Scott from the *Daily*

Telegraph stated, "for two-thirds of the evening people were asking one another, Who is she? ... Is this adventuress a mistress or can she be a mother?" (cited in Tydeman, 1982).

In order to bring a judgment about Mrs. Erlynne, one had to be sure of who she is. Inevitably, a character like her was open to criticism and blaming in such an age of morality as the Victorian period. According to the public opinion, stereotypical characters and their behaviors were so rooted in life that any deviancy from those behaviors would be "false". Some reviewers even told the readers of sensational books that they needed to remain far from the danger of forgetting the real definition of womanhood and follow the determined line of femininity. The argument was that the untypical behaviors, such as Mrs. Erlynne's, did not represent any elements of suppression or any consequences of the misrepresentation of women, but they were only creations of imagination which misrepresented womanhood. Such a reminder was from Mrs. Lynn in an essay, "The Girl of the Period" in *Saturday Review* (reprinted in 1883). These critics denied a remodeling of female characters in the existing literature, which confirmed the continuity of the conventional character models.

Surely, a mother's relationship with her daughter is another prominent issue for Wilde while examining and deconstructing gender traits. As previously mentioned, the Victorian period was a time when motherhood was being held equal to self-sacrifice with an unconditional love. E. Ann Kaplan declared that the reason why novel and other dramatic genres had been so popular was that they allowed the "paradigms of maternal sacrifice" (1992, pp. 76-7) without questioning. A similar idealization of the mother and romanticization of the mother figure is found in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, revealing the moral obsession with the ideal. All narratives produced in the mother-daughter relationship are significant in that they constitute the basics of femininity. In this point, Marianne Hirsch indicates the means through which these discourses allow space for re-examining norms rooted in culture (1989, p. 8). This relationship is on unstable grounds in the play just to reevaluate the effect of morality on gender. One can recognize three mother-child pairs in the play. The first is Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere. The second is Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Agatha. Lastly, Lady Windermere and her child, Gerard take

attention with regards to the mother's indifference to the son, just like her own mother had been to her in the past. The Duchess of Berwick gives the image of a responsible mother; however, how she takes responsibility is by loading the duty of Agatha's care on a rich husband-to-be. Similar to Mrs. Erlynne, she is knowledgeable about the social sanction that a woman is like goods for exchange; hence, the optimal ensuring is giving away the commodity she owns with the highest price possible. She has a point by the time she says "a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection" (I p. 31). Besides Mrs. Erlynne, the Duchess wants to get her daughter far from the impact of Lord Darlington since he gives signals of danger upon his intimate attitudes towards Lady Windermere. According to Regenia Gagnier (1986, pp. 120-21), Darlington can "pounc[e] on his friend's wife" any time. Thus, the way he gets interested in Lady Windermere results in the increase in the possessive behaviors of these mothers. This emphasis on the protective aspect of the Duchess and Mrs. Erlynne shows that Wilde distinguishes Mrs. Erlynne in this respect from the fragile, sometimes faulty mother type, which was a typical portrayal of motherhood on the Victorian characterization.

It can be inferred from these events in the play that Wilde scrutinizes the effect of parental authority, esteemed throughout the society at all times, on the development of gender traits. The mother, traditionally known as the guardian of a child's physical, emotional and psychological well-being, is the reason of chaos in her child's feelings of deficiency and vulnerability. Mrs. Erlynne is a good example of how influencing parenting is on the acquisition of women's traits. Paradoxically, though, Mrs. Erlynne does not approve the conventionality her daughter exhibits as a woman, and she attacks them in order to reveal its fragility. Wilde's moral sarcasm is also noteworthy here. The trouble caused by Mrs. Erlynne initially leads Lady Windermere into an immature feeling of despair, followed by a desire of revolt with the perception of an adult. The irony here is that despite the suffering she gives and mistreatment she shows to her daughter as the "fallen" woman, she proves to be the female who helps her daughter into her attempts to deconstruct her own behavioral frame and become a woman outside the conventions. While Lady Windermere says, "if we had

these 'hard and fast rules,' we should find life much more simple" in Act I (p. 12), the same woman expresses her thoughts with these words in Act IV:

There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's life to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one may walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice. I, who had shut my eyes to life, came to the brink. (p. 113)

Her "fallen" mother is the reason why she has made her mind this way in the course of events. Lady Windermere's socially "correct" codes of behavior and her mother's socially "tainted" fate mingle with each other just to make a judgment on where to draw the lines of correct womanhood impossible. On one edge of the construct of womanhood, there stands Lady Windermere; on the exact opposite, we see Mrs. Erlynne as the victim of her sexually comfortable manners.

Lord Darlington gives messages about a disrespectable woman existing among them, and the Duchess supports him with her gossip; these two are confirmed by Lord Windermere's declaration of Mrs. Erlynne as a wicked woman whose aim is to earn a place in the society. Her appearance in the ball gets everyone around to make their minds on her "character". Her outfit attracts attention due to the fact that it is too high-priced for a woman to buy in an honorable way. Her dressing is the reason why Lady Plymdale thinks she is "a woman of that kind" (II p. 48). Another cause for them to think of her as mentioned is the behavior shown by men, as they act carefully in order not to claim any association with her, Dumby being one of them. Her positioning as a stranger is reiterated by some scenes of solitude during the ball. The situation of being excluded by the other woman is demonstrated as a hint of her character.

Mrs. Erlynne is detached from the other women in the ball, who exist with a manifest unfriendliness around her. She physically isolates herself on purpose in order to remain within a distance. She is conscious of the social hostility she is exposed to, but also in the recognition that she depends on the society to get a name. She confesses to Lady Windermere: "I am afraid of the women, you must introduce me to some of them" (II p. 43). The men around her utter sexual implications on her, whereas women believe she is a prostitute. Lady Plymdale

holds the opinion that "women of that kind are most useful" (II p. 48) because these women deviate husbands' attention from the wives, which enables the wives to spare some time for their own. This commentary proves the common belief that prostitution is a safety lock for the society. Prostitutes certainly cause vagueness in the separation of the respectable and disrespectable in this sense.

As for Mrs. Erlynne's reflection of herself, it is possible to claim that she uses her attractiveness as a tool as she pays compliments to Lady Jedburgh and the Duchess of Berwick. Lady Windermere's denial in getting influenced by this attractiveness may result in the initial impression that there lies a sharp distinction between the good woman and the bad. As a "noble-hearted" woman, she does not volunteer in acceptance of a "corrupt" woman in spite of Lord Windermere's efforts in bringing them together. Ironically though, the woman whom she harshly despises is her ancestor, mother. An additional irony is that the mother ideal in the play collapses, while the self-sacrificing aspect of the same ideal is reinforced. Mrs. Erlynne does not give in to being portrayed as offender and resists with her risk-bearing aspect; she does not totally remain distant from the conventions, either. She says that the feelings she has for her daughter are far stronger than any other emotion she has been through. The unexpected point here is that this defining characteristic of the "virtuous" Victorian woman actually belonged to a fallen woman. Self-sacrifice was quite a discriminating feature of the constructed women of the period. As William E. H. Lecky mentions in his book, *The History of European Morals* (1869, p. 282), "Self-sacrifice is the most conspicuous element of a virtuous and religious character". She differs from the other women yet in other ways with regards to her thought-provoking nature, wit, skills in managing herself and her life as a good observer. These prove that she is suitable to become one of Wilde's dandy characters. She seems to stress out the aesthetic quality instead of morals in her dialogues, manners and physical appearance. She may not fully acquire the traits, character and mentality of a dandy at times; because the values she represents are mostly related to the way she looks. Even this view separates her from the typical representations of both a wicked woman and a virtuous one. Her daughter's conventional adaptation to the constructed woman image outweighs hers in this respect. Indeed, Richard D. McGhee mentions that Lady

Windermere must be called a “dowdy”, which is used by Wilde differently, meaning a puritan. Her overwhelming moral understanding leaves her husband in a tight spot and makes him lie to her (1980, p. 286). Lady Windermere’s authority over her husbands is not an issue in this respect; she has been proven as a childish figure at the moments she was embraced by her affectionate husband. At times when Mrs. Erlynne takes attention as a woman after financial gains, the portrayal of the typical dandy gets softened and she does not totally fit into it. Concerning her financial threat to Lord Windermere and Lord Augustus’s deception by her, she seems to exceed the limits of fear unlike the ways of behavior presumed from a woman in her situation. She does not refrain from establishing her own rules, the most striking example of which is her understanding of marriage construction. Her marriage with Lord Augustus will not be supported with love or romance, unlike the marriage of Agatha and Hopper. The fact that this marriage being outside the conventions is visible from Augustus’s alleged wish to track her into exile, merely to point out the estrangement of this woman from the constructs around her. Mrs. Erlynne is alone; unlike the other woman in the society, she can part with the ways taught her. While an ideal woman renders social constructs a responsibility to fulfill, she does not. Indeed, she usually discards the idea of responsibility in contrast to Lady Windermere, who builds her rhetoric on the essentiality of fulfilling responsibilities. Although there happen some moments when Lady Windermere inclines to exceed the limits of her life abound with rules, she is made aware of her connections to Lord Windermere and their child only to recognize the outrageousness of her act. Mrs. Erlynne regards the confined morals and runaway behaviors as frailness, though she realizes that her daughter speaks only of conventional womanly and manly traits. Lady Windermere refrains from any extraordinary action that would damage her female reputation, because she develops her womanhood on the “ideal” character, her mother.

Besides these, Mrs. Erlynne has an egoistic approach in conducting her life and affairs, and she cannot be thought of as a total female dandy due to her contrast to a frame where acts, their drives, and means of conduct are supposed to be drawn by aesthetics. That’s why it is probable to claim that Wilde does not categorize her in any terms, either as good or as bad, or as dandy or not. Such a

framing would be opposite to his basic aims on blurring the constructs. He manipulates the widely known construct of fallen woman for this same reason, too. The fallen woman of this play, Mrs. Erlynne contemplates on her lost past and “purity” at times, a case unexpected of a typical wicked woman. This contemplation, as it does in Wilde’s other fallen characters, makes her examine the settled gender constructs which have been formed by a mentality desiring to benefit from social opportunities. She may not be literally guilty as Mrs. Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband* is, but her speeches with Lady Windermere gives proof for the paradoxes she has suffered. She hesitantly asks Lord Windermere as she reflects her fear for Lady Windermere: “If I said to you that I cared for her, perhaps loved her even you would sneer at me, wouldn't you?” (IV p. 105). Prior to that, she expresses that she “want(s) to live childless still”, a statement which conflicts with the stage direction “hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh” (IV p. 103). As a mother, she seems to maintain Lady Windermere’s ideals in return for a painful process she would bear. Neither the fallen woman is completely “fallen” nor is the mother fully self-sacrificing in her given responsibilities. An inability of decision-making Wilde creates is consolidated as he demolishes another typical construct of the Victorian culture, which requires the double pain of a guilty person by worldly punishments and his/her own sense of ethics. He distorts the image of wicked woman by disclaiming the assumptions regarding a wicked woman and denies a regretful or dark fate. She goes on investing on her own appeal. Wilde does not totally abandon the social construct that there is a fallen and regretful woman, either, merely to maintain the intertwinement of the expected and unexpected.

In Wilde’s characters, one may observe a change from the beginning of the play to the end as a means of challenging the fixed character traits. For instance, Lady Windermere, who was initially harsh in her morals and decisions, turns into a woman who tries to see the truth beyond the visible at the end. Also, Lord Windermere seems eager to introduce a woman who wants to “get back” in Act I, whereas he gives importance more to what is visible as the play progresses. This ironical setting is Wilde’s device to enable the demolition of the decisive man and moral woman. At the end, what remains is that there is not necessarily a valid settlement of moral understanding. The characters believe in

the universal acquisition of their values; ultimately, the values are limited to pre-taught doctrines.

It is notable to consider Mrs. Erlynne as an owner of two stock characterizations, and she exceeds both. She is simultaneously a mother and a wicked woman. These two are certainly connected to each other as she turns out as “wicked” because of denying her position as a mother. She could not have stood to be anybody other than a fallen one as long as she trespassed the requirements of marriage and motherhood. Involving both traits in her at the same time, “Wilde not only subverted all the conventions governing the behaviour of the fallen woman, but dared to question the sacred status of motherhood as woman’s greatest ambition” (Eltis, 1996, p. 73). This complexity takes her out of the Victorian social construct of proper womanhood. A woman might not necessarily prefer merely to follow the route of motherhood. Mrs. Erlynne is also the woman with whom Wilde cracks the conventional myth of the fallen woman. Traditionally, when a female character was wicked, she was denied of the society and penalized at the end of the play, symbolizing the ultimate price of moral deviation. However, Mrs. Erlynne herself denies the puritan society and its gender values. She even gets engaged. In appearance, it can be suggested that Mrs. Erlynne resigns herself to stereotypical female pattern by accepting marriage, with the supposition that she will acquire a social position. In reality, her engagement leads to the collapse of the typical traits applied on a fallen woman, such as punishing and outcasting. In this way, Wilde enables a leakage in and provides a link between the definitions of moral and immoral woman. More, Mrs. Erlynne does not show a sign of regret for abandoning her role as a mother in the past, a situation that stands as a support to her wickedness. The disconnection here makes her close to the stance of a dandy. Her rebellion is clear in her confession to Lord Windermere: “How on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most” (IV p. 103). Evident from her distanced tone, the only thing she truly cares about is her own feelings. She manifests the image of a New Woman with her intelligent way of speech and manners. She violates the borders between femininity and masculinity. She is also a commentator in

politics, accepted as an area of male dominance. Talking to Lady Jedburgh concerning her nephew, she comments: “He thinks like a Tory, and talks like a radical” (II p. 45). Besides that, she appears quite comfortable in the settings where she interacts with males. In Act III, she is observed in Lord Darlington’s house, instructing Lady Windermere on a correct behavior. Unlike a classic view regarding a woman’s role as a mother, this scene presents her as the only authorial figure to give Lady Windermere advice with her knowledge. She prefers not to reveal her true identity to her daughter on purpose; similarly, she hides Lady Windermere’s letter to Lord Darlington from Lord Windermere by choice. The play apparently attaches a fair amount of power on a woman named “fallen”, eroding the drawn female borders. Mrs. Erlynne’s rejection of the mother role refers to paying the price of ignoring the Victorian female gender status. Paradoxically, the same social constructs prevent her from fulfilling her motherhood in the end since it would drag Lady Windermere’s reputation along with hers. Hence, the artificial social rules separate mother and daughter by breaking the link between them, instead of its claim to weave it.

As for Lady Windermere, it can be stated that she performs the innocent woman and wife, oversensitive to the binaries; black and white, good and bad, manly and womanly. The impression created on the audience in this respect is her concordance with the articulated female portrayal in the society. Within a precise but fallacious idealism, she seems to shut her eyes on the complex pattern of human behavior; she determines them according to the extent to how suited they are for their categories. Hence, she can be referred to as a sample for Victorian morality. As the play proceeds, however, some specific events she encounters challenge her in her way of thought, and she necessarily starts melting her solid borderlines, and these are the moments when alternative viewpoints may flourish. More importantly, none of them has to be superior to one other, so can coexist in order to be known. In Act IV, she says: “We all have ideals in life. At least we should have. Mine is my mother” (p. 107). One thing to be mentioned at this point is the elusiveness in the last phase she reaches. She is neither a totally radical nor a conservative woman clinging on womanhood based on morals. She embodies both, but represents none completely.

As the Victorian gender roles were male dominated constructs, the portrayal of woman was infected by male-centered opinions of femininity and takes part in male speeches in the play. Lord Windermere's implication that Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne are women of different worlds in Act II serves to prioritize his wife's womanhood rather than a woman's with a wicked past. Mrs. Erlynne tries to prevent him from finding out Lady Windermere's letter due to the fact that Lord Windermere needs to maintain his perception of Lady Windermere within the moral side; otherwise, he would most probably put an end to this marriage. The vision in his mind regarding female virtuousness is a designated one. Meanwhile, Mrs. Erlynne's brave appearance in protecting her daughter in another moment when the fragile femininity breaks down, as such kind of behaviors are socially attached to men. Women's alleged fragility and need to be under protection is reflected within the character of Agatha as well. The Duchess of Berwick enables her daughter to familiarize with a slight piece of the reality surrounding her, an example of which is her instructions on going to view photographs or watching a sunset. So Eltis even claims that Agatha is a kind of "Lady Windermere in the making" (1996 p. 84) in that she is made prone to any instruction on how to be a woman.

The way through which *Lady Windermere's Fan* violates female dependence on men is reversing so as to undermine the learnt gender traits. Position of the men in the play is determined with reference to female characters. Lord Windermere is situated as the husband of Lady Windermere throughout the play, for example. Also, it is Lady Windermere, not Lord Windermere, who is visited by Lord Darlington. As a woman, she causes first the pleasure, then the pain in Lord Darlington. Another male character proven to locate himself according to a woman is Lord Augustus. He adores Mrs. Erlynne and is tied to her apron strings. In the scenes where men have dialogues with each other, the talks are generally on women. As mentioned, however, there is not a total reversal of roles and identities, and this leaves the identities in an intersecting web of meanings. For instance, Mrs. Erlynne had many male figures in her life; she has been, and still is, attached to men's financial power in this respect. As the leading female characters exceeds their borders and remove the distinctions between what is proper and improper, male characters partly demonstrate a

dutiful attitude in contrast to their identification, and break the rules when they feel necessary. False morality and the responsibilities it loads on to female and male identities collapse together with the gendered discourse of the Victorian society.





3. *AN IDEAL HUSBAND*: WHEN IDEALS COLLAPSE

As a social play, *An Ideal Husband* (1895) puts the necessary disruption of moral balances in social and marital life in the center of the plot. As previously discussed, marriage and the separate roles it attaches on women and men constituted a considerable part of gender construction in the Victorian period; social stance and matrimony influence one another in an ongoing cycle. Wilde's approach is the disarray of this cycle by demonstrating how impracticable moral expectations of the society are. Various characters echo this act throughout the play. Indeed, ones who can be regarded as more trivial show much more delicacy in their approach to means of understanding. For instance, a solemn woman, Lady Chiltern tells her husband, Sir Chiltern during a "serious" flow of action that "It can never be necessary to do what is not honourable . . . To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh - be that ideal still" (I p. 51). On the contrary, during a "trivial" flow of action, Mabel, a trivial character, flatters Lord Goring during their courtship: "I delight in your bad qualities. I would not have you part with one of them" (I p. 21). Lady Chiltern aligns the love she feels for a man with devotion: "We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. . . . We needs must love the highest when we see" (I p. 51). A woman must sacrifice herself by deeply committing to a man and worshipping his existence. This was a trait expected of a typical Victorian woman. However, Mabel does not match love with worshipping. By the time Lord Goring explains her that he is not good enough for her as a mate, she feels soothed and expresses her gratitude, adding that she has been afraid for a while that he were. The audience herewith sees Sir Chiltern reacting to his wife in an aggravated manner, beside Lord Goring's indifferent and calm attitude: "We have all feet of clay, women as well as men . . . It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love . . . All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive . . . Let women make no more ideals of men" (II p. 97). Compared to Lady Chiltern, Mabel already acknowledges this. At the end of the play, Lord Caversham harshly warns Lord

Goring, his son, about the probability of being a husband not “ideal” for Mabel. Mabel says in return, "An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world" (IV p. 171). For her, Goring is already everything she wants to see in front of her. He is free to be a man of his own selection. On the contrary, she emphasizes her desire to be the woman, the wife herself, whom Goring wants to see. This attitude can possibly include the message Lady Chiltern is supposed to receive as well. Lord Goring becomes a means for Lady Chiltern to break her walls in terms of the concept she had believed with respect to an ideal man for so long. Instead of the ideal husband, she is now closer to embrace the real husband. The sharp contrast between Mabel and Lady Chiltern is the conflict itself that Wilde creates to impair the image of self-sacrificing woman in order to gain acceptance by her man and the moral dogmas.

Like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* includes many dramatic elements Wilde borrows from British and French theatre. The wicked woman who blackmails, or the comical situation of characters who are in the same setting but do not see each other are some of the elements Wilde adapts from French drama. Symbolic meanings of objects taken, relatives who reappear after long years, or revelation of a mystery are some other elements common in French and English tradition. British melodrama could be Wilde's inspiration with regards to the characters and plot structure, but it seems that he borrows the structural items rather than moral and emotional attributions in it. In his definition of melodrama, Peter Brooks argues that it stands for a setting that keeps the audience "in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things" (1976, p. 4). Wilde does not seem like achieving the sentimental aims of melodrama in his plot, either since it involves "strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety" (Brooks, 1976, pp. 11-2). Such binaries, which require explanations framed by “absolute” realities, are constructs that Wilde renounces. Whether a character's action is good or bad, or whether s/he is moral or not would indicate that the woman/ man is good or bad, moral or immoral,

well-adapted to the dictated gender norms or not. An approach like this is contrary to Wilde's aims to make the strict borders vague.

Hence, it should be noted that Wilde merely borrows from the melodramatic tradition in terms of characters. Heroes and heroines, evil figures, comic servants are taken from there. Mrs. Cheveley as the seemingly "evil" villain can be regarded as a rare occasion in this sense because the tradition generally employs a male character as villain. The fact that she is an outcast figure strengthens the belief that she is deprived of social morals expected of a good woman. Her constant loud laughs are ready to support how threatening she is not only to Lady Chiltern but to the social circle she is in. Her reference to Sir Chiltern when talking to Lady Chiltern goes "with a bitter laugh" (II p. 127). She is an antipole, a challenge to the constructed version of the ideal Victorian woman, who is vulnerable, angelic and in need of a man's protection.

Characterization in the play seems typically Victorian with its stock figures like a corrupt hero, an innocent wife, an immoral thrill-seeker, or a faithful friend. Wilde actually delivers these characters as stock within the stage directions. Sir Chiltern is a hero of romance despite his corrupt deeds and Lady Chiltern is no different from a deity with her "grave Greek beauty" (I p. 1), Goring is "flawless dandy" (I p. 20), Mabel is the embodiment of the "English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type" (I p. 5), and so on. Apart from this, he refers to the theme of the corrupt woman in a way that initially gets total acceptance from the contemporary society. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, he presents a more fluctuating portrayal of the corrupt woman; it can be argued that critical thinking arises more in it. In *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley, Lady Chiltern's mother, exhibits a more stable image in that she is generally talked of as an outcome of "horrid combinations". However, these two women show parallelism since they are both two sided, giving the implications of what a "good" and "bad" woman is supposed to be like. Wilde's corrupt women are far from defining the stereotypically "correct" or "false" womanhood, and in this way serve well to remove the borders of gender specifications.

Relationships between the characters, similar to the characterization, are mostly predictable at the beginning of the play. Connection between woman and man is issued as a tender subject designed by idolization. The main couple, Sir and

Lady Chiltern, draw a portrait of positioning each other above everyone else they know. Lady Chiltern's adoration is obvious from her words: "How I worshipped you! You were something to me apart from common life ... "(II p. 130). Several allegories and dialogues are employed in order to reflect sentiments of the Victorian culture. In another scene, Goring expresses his love for Mabel in a way a hero does, though with a difference; he taunts Mabel's attitude by saying: "Mabel, do be serious" (IV p. 206).

Apart from the sentimentalism, traditional melodrama exhibited women who are affectionate, devoted, and innocent as "good". These women represented the type of morality taught them in the family. However, they were remote from being acknowledged as decision makers. Bad ones, on the other hand, contrasted with these women and might even come to the forefront by manipulation of the power they acquired. These women, either good or bad, were bound to be "that way", and hence, unchanging; rules of biological nature defined the genders and their characteristics. "Natural" division of genders led to different roles and performances. In the play, the Chilterns seem to be absorbed by these rules. Underlined by all intellectual and psychological agents surrounding them, these sorts of women had to make sure that they establish themselves not in terms of achievements they put forth with their mental skills but in terms of purity, delicacy and generosity they would show as women. Men can know and apply the logical, reasonable and correct behaviors, whereas women are expected to have all the gentle, appropriate and fitting behaviors. As Lady Chiltern "violates" her husband's field, she does not know the gentle, appropriate and fitting, mentioned in the play as "true, gallant, and right". Upon the violation of other side, the violator pays the price of turning into a feminine man, or a manly woman. Considering these, it can be thought at first glance that *An Ideal Husband* divides both the female and the male characters into good or bad, proper or improper, just as the society dictates people to. However, when examined, the "good" as well as the bad are always open to derogate the social harmony, a fact that will ultimately cause the impact the "bad" lead to. Men are not perfect for the sake of being "men"; women are not as pure as they should be. Genders do not follow the ways designated for them, and Wilde does not intend to harmonize gender identities with the norms. The concept of women in

the play, for instance, is ravished and this is understood from the manners of the women, men's reactions in return, and even the plot development. By standing as an alternative to male authority, Mrs. Cheveley threatens their position. Ironically, she is a woman who has been denied of the social circles. She arouses constant suspicion. By employing her femininity, she either tempts (Baron Arnheim) or exploits (Sir Chiltern) men. The aforementioned "unreasonable" womanhood evolves, in her hands, into an assertion for being noticed.

Mrs. Cheveley digresses from her "natural" gender construct given her scheming attempts and her ambitiousness. Within the dialogues one can often see references to her affectedness. While Mabel is renowned for an "English type of prettiness" (I p. 5), she is more suitably an exotic and patterned one, a "work of art" (I p. 7). Mabel's depiction of Mrs. Cheveley in her words to Lady Chiltern, "I assure you she is coming upstairs, as large as life and not nearly so natural" (II p. 109) reveals her disapproval of this extraordinary female figure, both due to her disagreement with the natural order and due to an envy in her sexual revolt. As she puts on "far too much rouge" (II p. 90), for example, Goring is sure that she hides some things. Under the beautifully dressed body of Mrs. Cheveley lies an implication of common sense, Goring says, because of her careful, witty actions while trying to make Goring do what she wishes. She says she will give up threatening Robert so long as Goring accepts to marry her. Indeed, it is offensive to make mention of a dressing-common sense juxtaposition. Women's priority is being seen beautiful on the outer appearance, whereas mental skills and judgment are not within their use. Mrs. Cheveley does not seem to be upset about Goring's referencing to her perception of sex. She thinks Goring's allusion of sex as a challenge for women is only a compliment. Indeed, women like her are not influenced by such compliments (III p. 127). These two characters also argue about the manner of communication women and men lead among each other. Women do not, for Goring, exhibit supportive behavior amongst each other as much as men do. Here, Goring functions as a spokesperson of what the society believes the correct type of woman is, only to be disproven and debunked by Mrs. Cheveley.

Lady Chiltern is initially portrayed as the Puritan character of the play. In the first act, Lady Markby says to Mrs. Cheveley that "Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles"; besides, "[she] has a very ennobling effect on life" (I p. 41). Sir Chiltern reveals that he definitely holds the same perspective as the others do when he says: "She does not know what weakness or temptation is. . . . She stands apart as good women do—pitiless in her perfection— cold and stern without mercy" (III p. 117). Lady Chiltern is more than critical of the women who show "impertinent" behaviors of any type. In these moments, she stands for the lady-like womanhood whose meaning Wilde negates with an ambiguous woman like Mrs. Cheveley. It is obvious from her attitude towards Mrs. Cheveley; she cannot stand the pedantry Mrs. Cheveley exhibits when talking about what a mysterious strength she possesses over Sir Chiltern. When Sir Chiltern speaks with her, there can be recognized a certain abstention in him; he does not want Mrs. Cheveley to get harm from anyone. Lady Chiltern overreacts to her prudishness: "You are impertinent. What has my husband to do with you? With a woman like you?" (II p. 94). For Lady Chiltern, there is no reason to reach a consensus with a woman like her, just like the absence of reason for Lady Windermere in her communication with Mrs. Erlynne. Even a possibility of her husband's affiliation with Mrs. Cheveley discredits him in her heart irretrievably: ". . . a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it a second time, and should be shunned" (I p. 92). Lord Goring, although as broad-minded as possible in personal traits, thinks she is adamant in her behaviors: "Lady Chiltern, I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps you are a little hard in some of your views on life. I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient allowances" (II p. 74). In the final act, Lady Chiltern makes some changes in her thoughts and tends to act more helpfully towards Mrs. Cheveley with Lord Goring's impact. She shares her deepest belief with her husband, Sir Chiltern: "You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world" (IV p. 165). In this sense, Lady Chiltern is, physically, the representative of gender status quo, with a lot of questioning, ups-and-downs, and moments of awakening, though. This is why she cannot be considered as a typical woman of the Victorian norms.

As an apparent dandy of the play, Lord Goring seems to have undertaken the responsibility of leading the characters towards a way out of their "Puritanism". He is remarkably straightforward and fruitful in expressing his oppositions to characters' gendered behaviors and arguments. In the second act, he makes a conversation with Sir Chiltern about Lady Chiltern, who is the "perfect" woman and wife. Her strict morality, acceptance of the male power over the female and vulnerability makes her the ideal wife with respect to the social traditions. He comments on her upon listening to Sir Chiltern completely: "But if what you tell me is true, I should like to have a serious talk about life with Lady Chiltern" (II p. 56). When it is the following time the two are in a conversation, he aims to get Lady Chiltern ready for the shock she will feel for getting out of her own reality zone. This moment must be noted as the most significant scene of the play, as Lord Goring is to familiarize both Lady Chiltern and the audience with a significant theme of the play: "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing" (II p. 75). Though Lady Chiltern is not within the realization of her husband's past secret yet, she gets confused due to Lord Goring's words. She states she would remember what he told her, but did not understand the reason he told them. Her husband, as the ideal husband, has all the characteristics a man is expected to have; career, strength, social reputation and virtue. She does not consider the possibility that he would deviate from the norms of being a man.

Lord Goring does not realize that it is Mrs. Cheveley, not Lady Chiltern, who comes to visit him in his house in Act III. So, he tells himself to "give her a lecture through the door" (III p. 116), and he aims to do that by enabling Sir Chiltern's love serenade for her. However, it was the wrong person to exhibit his love. In Act IV, Goring feels a more abundant and straightforward drive to inform Lady Chiltern about the real motives behind people's actions, specifically after he exposed Mrs. Cheveley's aims and detracted Lady Chiltern from the destructive consequences of her letter. He wants Lady Chiltern to urge Sir Chiltern to accept the position in the Cabinet, which he has been found suitable for lately. For this reason, he says to her:

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. (IV p. 163)

This is Goring's reflection of the traditional gender perceptions of the Victorian society. He lays bare the attachment of strong emotionality on women, whereas men are let to achieve their goals in publicity. Following this speech, Sir Chiltern enters the room and it becomes visible that the speech reaches its aim. Lady Chiltern tells her husband the things she heard from Lord Goring, namely things which "separate" men and women as different categories. She does not neglect mentioning that she learnt those she spoke of, and more, from Lord Goring. Goring's speech becomes useful in Lady Chiltern's convincing Sir Chiltern not to reject the Cabinet offer. Another revelation occurs when Sir Chiltern opposes to his sister's marriage with Goring; Lady Chiltern explains Mrs. Cheveley's unexpected visit to Goring's house and that Goring is not to be denigrated for that. This shift in behavior can be mentioned as a radical change for Lady Chiltern, since she had reacted to Lord Goring's wish before as such: "You want me to tell Robert that the woman you expected was not Mrs. Cheveley, but myself? That it was I whom you thought was concealed in a room in your house, at half-past ten o'clock at night? . . . Oh, I wouldn't, I couldn't!" (IV p. 152). It is not possible to state that Lord Goring has immediately changed Lady Chiltern's perception from conventional to a liberal one; however, he has clearly opened up a new, freer window to her.

3.1 Social Influence on the Creation of Gender Roles

As discussed in the previous chapters, gender is not recognized as a fixed entity that produces differing actions but as an "instituted" identity produced in time through a pattern of actions. The idea that gender is the collection of various acts prove it to be "performative". Mabel's depiction as the embodiment of beauty, for instance, is a solid example of the traditional objectification of women. Perfectly pretty, she is presented as the childish purity (I p. 8). Not surprisingly, Mrs. Cheveley brings sharp criticism to the constant attribution of

innocence and purity to women. Lady Chiltern was getting prize for good conduct at school. A pacemaker for other women, she stands as a true example of female. On the other hand, Mrs. Cheveley do not perceive herself as a stereotypical female that accounts for the ideal woman. Besides, women pay prices once they are attractive. Society wears them away by paying endless courts to them. Mrs. Cheveley gives endless importance to the charm of the clothes she carries on herself in this respect. There is the conventional recalling that woman's dressing is above everything, but her style differs a lot from the "correct" way of female dressing. She cannot contend if she has a responsibility prior to the one for the dressmaker. Mrs. Cheveley, hence, is the woman unfit for the social design, an anti-figure to her daughter Lady Chiltern, who was trained to become the woman of the society she belongs to.

Mrs. Cheveley says men and women are different on the basis of possibility of explanation; women's psychology and structure are complex; they remain mystic unlike men's, which are frequently explained by solid information. This results only in valorization of female ideals, while men's psychology can simply be taken into analysis. Women have no proper place in scientific investigation, as science issues "rational" methods and it is not possible to study women's "functioning" under those terms (I p. 16). This commentary may imply a difference naturally inherent between the female and the male, but what Wilde mentions here cannot be further than some anatomical or neurological differences. Indeed, similarities and differences between women and men is a cultural and historical process to be investigated.

It can be asserted that in contrast to the common belief that female and male practices are the same across cultures, they can vary according to the culture they are produced in. In some cultures, biological inclinations can be stressed; in some, they can be resisted, or can just be extraneous. For instance, when a society excludes females from activities requiring mental activity such as critical thinking, politics, or finance, any biologically existent difference is bound to be overemphasized. In the play, while the necessity of Lady Chiltern being a socially and politically passive, obedient woman is emphasized, her husband is urged to lead an active life in politics and prove his knowledge to the society. If the males of this society tended to be passive, and the females,

active, points of focus might undergo a huge difference. Female passivity is no more than a performance constructed to allocate individuals' roles within the social life in a relatively effective manner, and the male is active outside the household only because he performs it. Household and familial work has a lot to say about the distribution of gender roles in the society.

Gender roles, like all entities that are shaped, processed and mobilized in accordance with dominating powers, are often realized as the outcome of interactions through linguistic reciprocity and social activity. From this perspective, only one of the instances where the language of masculinity is troubled is when Lady Chiltern participates in Woman's Liberal Association. As a member, she does not contend herself with small talk on subjects attributed to women, such as dresses. She clarifies to Lord Goring that they had much significant subjects to discuss in their meetings, which he might have found tedious. She satirizes the serious line Goring and his fellows draw in political arena (II p. 70). Her insistence proves that political matters do not belong to men's discussions. Once portrayed as the ideal woman and wife of her society with her compliance, she now criticizes and rises against the labelling that women are to deal with only trivial matters. This is her deconstruction of the pre-given perception of womanhood.

As Goring's reflection of the social expectations shows, while females are thought of succeeding better in oral and written duties, males are promoted as better in numerical and analytical tasks. In actuality, social environment has the biggest share in the known differences. From birth, boys are allowed to visit more composite spaces, a fact contributing to the development of spatial ability. In addition to her challenging attitudes to the fixed traits of women, Mrs. Cheveley says that only men need high education, and this is an unfortunate situation. Lady Markby remarks the limited capacity of men, declaring they can achieve as much as their capability allows them to, which is not too deep. She states: "In my time, of course, we were taught not to understand anything. That was the old system, and wonderfully interesting it was. I assure you that the amount of things I and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite extraordinary. But modern women understand everything, I am told" (II p. 86). In her case, especially old generations, such as hers, were left

undereducated since it was the “old system” believed to be applicable. What was plausible was women’s inability to understand matters then, so they were instructed on not synthesizing information around. Mrs. Cheveley’s generation and onwards, which are much modern, understand things former generations were deprived of. Still, men look like too confusing for women to understand. Despite the Victorian stableness on the belief that males exist only to outweigh females, societies where women have more individual rights and behave more freely, no gender-related difference in girls’ of boys’ spatial abilities was detected (Fausto-Sterling, 1992). In other words, Lady Chiltern has both the skills and the position to speak in public sphere as much as any other individual has, regardless of gender.

Victorian society is even critical of colors people wear on their dresses. Yellow, Lady Markby says, is a color associated with gays, so she cannot wear that color from the time society pinned it on her as a sign of dirty image. Her recognition of the color yellow in this way evokes Michel Foucault’s argument. By reviewing traditional beliefs concerning sex, Foucault aims to reach out the means through which individuals become subjects of their own sexual activities. During this examination, he mentions all sorts of regulations and institutions that transform people into physical, measurable, “docile” bodies, calling them “disciplines” (Foucault, 1975). In the disciplining process of bodies, our clothes, our place of living, our behaviors gain great significance. Surely, gender roles attached to people are inseparable to the process. For Foucault, individuals stand as "subjects of desire", and this story dates back to centuries ago. Indeed, Lady Markby is aware a woman may easily become a subject of desire when she wears certain colors. Though this is a topic society in general is critical of, she does not seem bothered or affected by its approach. While she reveals the social belief that yellow is the color of gay people, she does not stand against them. Hence, what she does is to scoffingly expose a belief about gender constructs. When they are made to find out the cores in their desires, those cores themselves will turn out to be historical constructs. For instance, ancient Greeks did not know the concept of homosexuality as it has been known since the nineteenth century. So, they did not categorize people as heterosexuals, either. Homosexual traits were not signs of deviancy. In this

sense, Foucault recalls the terms “moral” as the collection of rules people are made to comply with, and “ethical” being the moral mode for a person to act. Another example Lady Markby gives is related to men’s dressing. So ugly is the style of fashion they absorb into their own hats, in her terms, that declaring them as the determiner of fashion is a shame (II p. 88). Indeed, this ethical pattern is no more than a design arranged through a homophobic perspective. As Foucault (1984) states, the term “homosexual” is a production of discourse, not an existing concept.

One point about Lord Goring is that despite his manners against the set norms in many of the marital roles and relationships, he chooses marriage at the end, which makes him different from the other dandies in Wilde’s other social plays. Despite his choice, indeed, he constantly resists being called a man of romance during the play, which proves his possession of a double feature: a part of the society he is in, but demonstrating gender traits differently than he is supposed to. Following his initial appearance in the scene, he rebels at Mrs. Cheveley, saying that he is not romantic at all. Actually, he is not “old enough” to be romantic and leaves the job of being romantic to his seniors. Wilde also makes a note of Lord Goring as: "a flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic" (I p. 19). Indeed, his attitudes, manners and words during the flow of the action exposes him as a potential romantic. The instances when Lord Caversham calls him “very heartless” are refuted by him and he replies, "I hope not, father" (pp. 24; 105; 113). Certainly in his concern for Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern he is anything but heartless. Both Sir Robert and Lady Gertrude remark repeatedly on what a good and loyal friend he has been to them both. His relationships with women carry the hint of his romance as well. Mrs. Cheveley tells him that she was loved by him in the past, and even proposed marriage, and he accepts it by interpreting the situation: "That was the natural result of my loving you" (III p. 124). Coming to Mabel, he confesses how he desires to be listened to and taken seriously only by her. He utters the words “I love you” to her, continuing with a kiss. He says his love for Mabel aloud in the final act, and no woman except Mabel has a place in his life. Though Lord Goring, in Wilde’s own words, can be "the first well- dressed philosopher in the history of thought" (II p. 99), his romantic sensitivity takes the lead in his

relationships. Similar to Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Goring demonstrates traces of moments when he follows his heart, and believes in the reign of love in relationships. The style of education he adopts as a dandy figure does not exclude humanly needs and desires. The refined and elegant dandy can, fairly enough, carry a heart full of love. Though he seems to reject being a romantic, these examples refer to the fact that he does not recognize marriage as a typical Victorian individual does; namely, a transaction to gain social recognition. He challenges the traditional perception of marriage in this sense.

As a woman, Mrs. Cheveley seems much more insensitive to the emotional echoes than Goring is, another instant where Wilde transposes the gender traits. In Act II, Goring's correspondences Mrs. Cheveley finds on his desk are mainly commercial, symbolizing his financial transactions. A pink paper catches her, as it cannot have place on a man's desk. She contends that it almost shows the start of a romantic relationship, but such relationships must not include emotions. The only proper way for them is to "begin with science and end with a settlement" (II p. 110). Finding a woman/man to marry is a duty which is based on sensible assumptions. Meanwhile, she can guess from the handwriting that the letter was written by Gertrude. For Mrs. Cheveley, she reflects her stiff morality even on the shape of letters so that she recognizes her from her writing style. Besides, Lord Goring construes Mrs. Cheveley's criticism of London society as such: "The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies" (I p. 27). For him, this is what she meant upon disapproving the people's manners. Mrs. Cheveley does not believe in gender roles; hence, it is quite possible for her to exchange the attributions to female-male. A man's resemblance to a dowdy, just as a woman's to a dandy, is not normally possible because society names women dowdies, and men, dandies. Referring "manly" and "womanly" attributions to the opposite of each other carries the purpose of replacement of social perceptions regarding the woman and the man.

In addition, the concept of "nature" in *An Ideal Husband* is a theme which can be examined with respect to Wilde's perception on the socially constructed gender behaviors. Wilde issues that nature is not the outcome of a self-induced power, but is constituted by human comprehension. The construct of nature

permits analyzing the normative approach societies bring on the gender categories, too. Pre-established as biological, many ways societies attribute to sexes are productions of culture. Hence, ladies, gentlemen, wicked women, all-knowing wise men are all to be judged under this nature. From this perspective, Mrs. Cheveley poses a threat to the “natural” concept of womanhood which itself is a human-shaped box. Lady and Sir Chiltern’s gender performances, while judging Mrs. Cheveley, can be declared as natural so long as nature as the artefact allows in this sense. Gender roles are not natural but constructed. What matters is not biology, but cultural and social perceptions and constructs.

In this understanding of nature as a cultural outcome, Wilde’s dandies are the best spokespeople of nature. Nature forms the basis of his frivolousness, and evokes wonder about him. When Goring says: "It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world" (II p. 101), he points out the subjective sentiments which truly explains the rules of the world, rather than the established borders under the name of objectivity. In fact, even subjective emotions can be regarded as part of the norm, certain ways in which men and women feel and act. They are not natural but given, learnt.

Mrs. Cheveley’s outer appearance is a strong indicative of her deconstruction of womanhood. Her extravagant dresses and the makeup on her face lead the others to think she is unnatural and tries to hide her “real” body. Her makeup is surely a revolt against the expectation of female naturalness, or her exaggerated manners and laughter, the trampling of moral sanctions. Mrs. Alexander Walker stated that makeup on the face had a separate meaning in Victorian period, as it was “a sign which deceives, and, what is worse, which is intended to deceive” (1840, p. 317). It was affiliated with a disrespected layer of the society; prostitution. For Mrs. Lynn Linton, “a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face as the first articles of her personal religion - a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses” (reprinted in 1883). Mrs. Cheveley’s bright “Venetian” red hair is another characteristic complying with this definition of the unnatural woman of the period. This style totally contrasts with the socially embraced feminine qualities; Mrs. Cheveley demonstrates the corrupt, outcast woman in her physical appearance.

In comparison to Mrs. Cheveley, Lady Chiltern appears as the angelic female who goes along with the “natural” construct of womanhood in the beginning of the play. The “natural” construct of woman in the Victorian society emphasizes passivity, obedience to men, loyalty to household, unconditional support and acceptance, all of which Lady Chiltern exemplifies. She is pure to the extent that she fulfils the responsibilities given to the female. Sir Chiltern is quite effectual in shaping and preserving her image throughout the acts. For him, she is the “white image of all good things, and sin can never touch [her]” (IV p. 236). She and her husband seem to collaborate in enlivening a role that belongs to the household and needs to stand clear from the social sphere. Actually, she aims at regulating her husband’s behaviors and his image against the society; hence, in a manner less acute than Mrs. Cheveley’s, she objects to the constructed gender roles. For instance, Sir Chiltern writes a letter by his own hands; however, the words are told to him by Lady Chiltern. For Mrs. Cheveley, politics are the only source of pleasure (I p. 17). Lady Chiltern’s affiliation with politics is about the noble requirements rather than pleasure, but she in a way lays her own thoughts as she works for Women’s Liberal Association, a union where women do more important work “than look at each other's bonnets” (II p. 94). This act effects Goring in that it is out of the limits defined for a woman to be in; he even attributes this to her childlessness. However, he does not do this in such a strict and stinging way; Goring’s tone here sounds sarcastic.

The crisis occurring within the plot can be interpreted as an indicator of crisis in the perceptions of the gender norms. Mrs. Cheveley’s attack at the constructed relationship of the Chilterns poses a threat to their marriage, but more than that, reveals the inner confusions the couple has with regards to duties and the masks they are wearing in the society. The threat she poses on the couple is that they will get deprived of their respected marriage. Sir Chiltern is in the tight situation of parting either with his wife or his political reputation. The same is valid for his wife; she is about to lose either her husband or her convictions. The outcome of the conflict is intermediary; Sir Chiltern neither fulfills Mrs. Cheveley’s expectations nor speaks out his guilt. Lady Chiltern excuses him but she claims Mrs. Cheveley’s wish that he abide by her words. There is not only a man who is released from being damned, but also a woman who regains the

husband she holds in her image. Without going under any ample price, he reaches the chance to get the prime minister position and she quits her assertions on a need for moral reconciliation. Such questions arise at the end: does this reconciliatory atmosphere rank any gender above the rest? Is Lady Chiltern persuaded on quitting her moral follow-up because they are already fake? Does theory and application comply with each other, or are they not necessarily coherent? In other words, Sir Chiltern does not gain power and have a say due to being that “virtuous” construct; neither does Lady Chiltern enliven the husband image constructed in her mind. Dreams shatter, beliefs regarding gender features are overthrown.

The way Wilde’s main characters in the play perceive the requirements for being “true” gender performers connects well to how genders are put on display in the outer world. Similar to Lady Chiltern’s holding her dream husband in high esteem, Sir Chiltern puts her in the position of a “saint” with a “white image of all good things” (III p. 162). The emphasis is on “image” in these incidents. As a dear friend of Sir Chiltern, Goring elevates that image, adding the bravery and trustworthiness of men which rejoice in “lines of intellect” (III p. 165) to Lady Windermere’s list of images. Wilde seems to benefit from these ideals for the sake of the continuation of the events in the plot and even this can be viewed as a reflection of worldly conflicts whose continuation is enabled by the distribution of gender traits. The toxicity within the given borders of gender performances is as destructive in the play as it is in real life.

Wilde’s dandies demolish fixed perceptions of genders. The dandy ought to reveal both the fixed gender system in the society and subvert people’s understanding of these stereotypical roles. Hence, the dandy is observed to be a revolutionary from the outside, while s/he is a representative of the gender s/he was brought up by. Considering Goring, one sees this double aspect. His appearance, clothes and manners are far from conventions, but several speeches and actions he delivers appeal to the traditional family morals. He stresses out the necessity of commitment in marriage, shows his love for his father, or disdains the craze for financial inducements. While this fits with traditional perceptions of men in the English society at first glance, his mockery of marriage, and messages in his dialogues are totally against them. Hence, Goring

carries two poles within himself. His outer face is the gentleman displaying self-discipline parallel to what is socially expected of his gender. His show-off with the buttonholes can be one of the most visible incident where he obeys the rules of being a gentleman. He looks very traditional and boring. The audience, however, ought to see the self-mockery he makes behind as he declares: "I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole" (III p. 99). His words here are sarcastic and subversive. He mentions how essential the outfit and the behavioral codes are to be respectable, but the stage directions inform that he is "clever, but would not like to be thought so," also "fond of being misunderstood" (I p. 20-1). His unpredictability regarding the extent to which he suits the definition of male gives both him and Wilde the chance of deconstructing fixed values while remaining within the same setting.

Lord Goring should be referred to as the dandy of *An Ideal Husband*. He is recognized as a character who disregards all seriousness. Hence, he is constantly in a series of discussions with Lord Caversham, his father. His father's wish for Goring is his acquirement of a respected career in political arena, marrying and having children. These possibilities are thought of as far from Lord Goring in Act I. For Goring, romantic communications are merely for the people of higher positions; also, life goes by with respect to fulfillment of desires. He obviously challenges and stands against all notions Lord Caversham tries to dictate on him. He never dreams of starting a family, or acquiring a political status, since he thinks himself to be "far too young" (IV p. 141). Marriage is certainly an object of ridicule for him. He is not much after the virtuousness of a man in the way gendered rules require. He accepts that "if we men married the women we deserved, we should have a very bad time of it" (IV p. 142), an approach which is untypical of the conventions both of his day and of general expectations on manhood. He states several traditionally embraced ideas in the final act, though. Here we encounter a monologue by Goring, one which carries the elements of a philosophical dandy speech. He urges Lady Chiltern to elevate her husband in all conditions by backing up his decisions. Here, many critics would unite on the point that such a statement contradicts with Wilde's ideas and beliefs, considering his opposition to the fixation and

categorization of sexualities, the support he gives for women's education in the academy in his articles published *The Woman's World*, and development he employs in the characterization of female dandies, like Mabel (Eltis, 1996). Not only matrimony but also society itself seem to be derisive concepts from both female and male dandies' point of view. The comments they make reveal the extent to which they view social constructs as unreal and trivial. At the end of the play, beside Lord Goring, Lord Darlington also speaks as if he is now directed towards a life surrounded with traditions more. This brings in a difference between the typical dandies of Wilde and these two characters, especially Lord Darlington, when he had been following a line contradictory to what he preferred to at the end of the play.

3.2 Impossibly Perfect Gender Expectations

The idealized construct of manhood in the Victorian period is the main theme in *An Ideal Husband*. The play abounds in moments when wives of the Victorian society show their views of an ideal husband. We are acquainted with Lady Chiltern, who is the main female character of the play, as her most prominent feature being a woman of "exquisite fragility" (I p. 5). She is similar to Lady Windermere in the sense that she is a respected Puritan. In the play, we hear favorable remarks about her, such as her purity, devotion, or good intentions. Of course, such a Puritan woman cannot be expected to forget and bear and mistakes made in the past. We can recognize this trait in her attitudes to Mrs. Cheveley, who is presumably a fallen single woman like Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She does not feel sympathy towards her at any case. Although Sir Chiltern tries to make her think that Mrs. Cheveley may have undergone some changes within the passing time, she is not convinced, and argues that a person's past is who that person is, and someone's past is the means through which that someone is to be judged (I p. 48). By the time she learns that her husband's political fame has been constructed upon a lie, she does the same and judges him according to the past. Previously, she was not aware of any errors to be found in his characteristic features. So, she idolized him. As was Lady Windermere, Lady Chiltern was always unaware of the reality. When she learns what the real story is, her husband's portrait which she

had always envisaged is shaken, and her imagery gets confused. Here, the only message presented is surely not the high level expectations women are required to have concerning men and manhood by the society. We also witness the consequences of women's overprotected upbringing. This both leads to them feeling like watching life from a bell jar, and makes them imagine that male figures are supposedly more assertive than they are.

The word "ideal" in the title of the play establishes the ground to mockery with respect to both the ideals' being irrelevant to actuality and the traditional way being "ideal" is understood in the Victorian culture. The requirements of masculinity, based on a collective agreement, throws away the gender ideals; indeed, "ideal" is ignored and not defined with specific traits. When Lady Chiltern holds her husband as the ideal man, she makes a mistake; however, the following suggestion for an atonement is solid. As she gives in to the ideals, they are invalidated.

Distinctions made about women's and men's sexuality were deeply ingrained in everyday life and connections in the Victorian period. Power in this respect was not a fixed part of individual lives; rather, it promoted the idea of self-control. Many Western societies required that masculinity be far from demonstrating emotions. Lady Chiltern's idealization of her husband is deeply rooted in this idealization. He is not like the other male figures that are on a power trip, cheats, tricks, or commit corrupt deeds. Underneath each men lie some inclinations for bad behavior that eventually cause disgrace, but she wants him never to step out of line. The reason is clear: her love for him depends on the manners that make sure to reflect the husband traits ideal for the society. Whenever he starts behaving out of the defined male borders, her love undergoes the danger of ending. This means losing everything she owns in terms of her understanding of marriage. Hence, he should sustain his image as the ideal husband. She verbalizes how influential his ideal stance is in the political and social environment. She says: "you have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher ideals—I know it, and for that I love you, Robert" (II p. 54). Evidently, she feels love and affection on the grounds that he is respected by his environment. For Lady Chiltern, "Robert must be above reproach" (II p.

73). She does not seem to allow anybody to speak ill of him. He is such a godly figure in her thought that he will never tempt to commit ill behavior, like other men may. On the other hand, Lord Goring tries telling Lady Chiltern the other side of behaviors which are seemingly innocent or faultless. What if men, Lord Chiltern being one, got into a scandalous action because he was a human being and prone to making mistakes? Her answer is definite: he is a man that could neither engage in foolishness nor mistakes. People from various positions with various needs and interests produce gender.

Men have imperfections, as women do. Wilde's audience was not prepared to be immersed in the deconstruction of gender binary. For this reason, Wilde seeks a way to balance the inequality in people's perceptions of womanhood and manhood. Men do not belong to an extraordinary species whose members have the capacity to achieve the hardest tasks, or do the most of the work in society. Just like the way Lord Windermere is defined in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Sir Chiltern is introduced as a distinctive, respected, and genuine man. His morality is beyond measure, his character involves all the positive qualities a man can have, and his self-discipline is exemplary for the rest of the men. All these qualities render him as an idol in Lady Chiltern's eyes. Indeed, the fact that Wilde presents these male characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* as flawless comes to mean a negation of the rest of the males in the society of the period. Meanwhile, he does not refrain from criticizing the unrealistic expectations society loads on those perfect figures. Such an understanding of morality becomes a device for Wilde to reveal the hypocritical ways through which society operates. It creates false limitations for gender identities in this sense.

In the first act, we learn from Mrs. Cheveley that Sir Chiltern based his financial wealth on selling a secret of the cabinet to a stock exchange speculator. His deed is in total contrast with the construct of a decent Victorian man. However, he would be outcast if this event was heard. Mrs. Cheveley could intimidate him with this secret. As a close friend, Lord Goring prevents the secret from being revealed among public. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cheveley carries it out to Lady Chiltern, which creates huge disappointment on Lady Chiltern's side, and disgrace on Sir Chiltern's. Sir Chiltern proposes the idea that "public

and private life are different things. They have different laws, and move on different lines” (I p. 49). He is a double-faced faker. In the final act, the events move parallel in a way to what he has said; he gets an offer for participating in the cabinet. He is even regarded as a budding genius in politics; hence, Lord Caversham supposes that he may be the prime minister sometime in the future. Ironically, he confesses to Lord Goring that the truth “stifles” him (II p. 71). His approach to truth tells that the morality of man is not more than a construct, a mask to protect his stance among the society.

Sir Chiltern is a highly attractive figure. He is physically charming and appears to be mentally adorable. However, Wilde also hints the forthcoming dissolution he will make on this perfect man, as the stage direction says, “picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons” (I p. 12). As a male, he would possibly be exposed to more criticism than a female would if showing inappropriate gender traits. Males do not abstain from criticizing each other, emphasizing each other’s “stupidity” and “dumbness” as they tend to adopt “feminine” interests. The reason for men’s dwelling on the “stupidity” of being feminine can be linked to the heavy pressure put on the female by the family, friends, and societal organs. Across the Victorian societal divisions, males are generally portrayed as leading, promoting, creating. On the other hand, females are presented as obedient, following, sensitive. If Lady Chiltern learnt Sir Chiltern’s bribery, she would end their marriage, and disdain him. Not only her but also all members of the society would contempt and denigrate his fortune, career and personality. This is ironical, as people acting these ways surely conduct many ill businesses themselves. The reason why they direct all attention to others around is to camouflage their own damaged image and to save themselves from public disgrace. Sir Chiltern is quite uneasy about the probability of falling into disfavor. He does not regard his deed in the past as a fault, but as a purchasing activity of a career achievement required on that day. There is nothing at this point to break his male image which is ideal with respect to the Victorian manhood.

As Lady Chiltern learns her husband’s bribery, her world collapses. The man she has idealized in all aspects turns out to be just the opposite. His purity and honesty made him different than all other men. For her, he was “something

apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain” (II p. 96). When he is detached from these characteristics, Lady Chiltern is face-to-face with the loss of her deep love for him. Sir Chiltern wants to prove her wrong since men are prone to making mistakes, just as all humans are. Idealization of men is the point where every woman is faulty. While men see women’s weaknesses and mistakes, and accepts them as they are, women divinize men and do not want any imperfection to persevere in their existence. Besides, he is aware of the tremble society will bring about; he will be announced as a disgraceful and dishonored man, so his position as a friend, a politician, or a kin will be shattered. Another projection representative of the social pressure on genders is visible when Sir Chiltern confesses the impact of having a child on married couples. If they had a child, Lady Chiltern could be softer in her response to him and embrace him back despite his past deeds (III p. 117). She could think she had to shut her eyes to his mistakes in order to save the family. This is typically expected of women as an inextricable performance of their role.

Sir Chiltern’s current position in the Parliament, Goring also alleges, constitutes who he is. He establishes his high status among other individuals with the help of his career. As Lady Chiltern insists on his drawback from political life, she actually wants to get him to step towards a life without status. Social stance is everything for men. When one takes it away, s/he hauls him into evanescence. Men are not born to disappear; rather, they are bound to be pardoned. Their lives matter more than women’s. The reason is non-negotiable; women lead lives through continual cycles: they are confined to their roles as wives, domestic housewives, nurturers and mothers, while men are intellectually deeper and richer in ambitiousness. Lady Chiltern had not insisted in his decision making at a serious degree, though. These comments by Goring upset her, and simply urge her to try dissuading Sir Chiltern from his decision. She seems to be convinced of Goring’s remarks on women’s function. They should not spoil any breakthrough by men: “That is how women help the world. I see that now” (IV p. 163). After various fluctuations in thoughts, Lady Chiltern displays a manner obedient to what male power tells her to. However, one can

never claim she fits that typical representations as a consistent character due to the many rebellious speeches she has uttered.

It can be realized that the secret Sir Chiltern has in the play includes different kinds of “debt”s. Lady Chiltern stresses out the commonness of men carrying such secrets, not to mention she is ignorant of the fact that Sir Chiltern also has one: “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!” (I p. 52). In response to this, Mrs. Cheveley, who threatens Sir Robert to destroy his public reputations, puts her thoughts straightforward in this topic. She regards her communication with Sir Cheveley as a deal of commerce. She expects him to pay her the money she desires; otherwise, she will make him pay a price bigger than the one he has refrained from. Actually, money is not the only thing she aims at. She occasionally reminds Sir Chiltern that past is irretrievable, even if as a man he is wealthy enough, he will never be able to buy it. On hearing these bitter words, Sir Chiltern denies taking them seriously, or being offended. With a visible excitement, he shares his opinion with Lord Goring: “I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price. That is all” (II p. 59). The play ends with Sir Chiltern’s emancipation from the payment Mrs. Cheveley demands. He does not have to do it anymore. Sir Chiltern reports Mrs. Cheveley’s plan of treachery for Argentine Canal to Parliament. Mrs. Cheveley’s fraud is revealed in this way, so she becomes obliged to retrieve her financial claims. Sir Chiltern was indebted to society in moral terms; and in this way he paid his debt by means of a help he provided for his public. He prevents people who are unaware of the plots underneath from joining a project full of intrigues. He contributes to keeping the innocent people of his society away from thievery. On the other hand, he has the personal realization that he owes another debt to Lord Goring. He tells him that he has always been indebted to his friend because the person who owes the largest share in rescuing Sir Chiltern from bad public reputation, as well as from a bad marriage, is Lord Goring. For the same reason, he complies with his sister’s marriage with Lord Goring, even though he is not much willful in the beginning. Similar to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, thus, *An Ideal Husband* presents

the scene of the payment of all debts, both in public and in private sphere, in the final act. The characters' accounts are settled, and they will continue their expectedly "new" lives from now on.

On the other hand, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont, who are known as being married to "perfect" husbands, complain of it and say this is tragic. These husbands are domestic and meticulous, which makes them dull. In a way, marrying such timid husbands turns into punishment for these women. Both are known as possessing reliable personalities without any trace of violence, a thing anticipated of women. The way Mrs. Marchmont thinks her husband should show attention to her is calling her "morbid", where Wilde pokes fun at the affectionate aspect believed to be inherent in women. Her complaint about her husband's indifference concerns his lack of calling her "morbid" (I p. 28), nothing else. When she says he has not even called her morbid, she plays with the meaning of an expectation women commonly have from men; compliment. She continues by blaming men of being "selfish" due to that. Lady Basildon agrees with her by blaming them of their "materialism" (I p. 29).

Because of his position in the House of Commons, the husband of another female character, Lady Markby, has turned into a man she wished he hadn't. She defines it as a regeneration. For her, it is the representation hall of ordinary and shallow people. He is insensitive due to the fact that he has not bought a precious present to her for a long time. Hence, lower class practices are as destructive as the Higher Education of Women for marriages. They risk it. On the other hand, men are obliged to receive high education, they need it.

Female characters, especially Mabel Chiltern and Lady Chiltern, show an essential degree of change in the play, which indeed symbolizes the importance Wilde gives to female voice. We do not come across such openly progressive characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. As *An Ideal Husband* was being written, the New Women's movement emerged across many areas including Europe and America, and it was changing the perspective of womanhood in the late nineteenth century. Women rights gained more and more public space and "new women" was the name given to the women who defended their rights under the influence of this movement. The echoes of this social and political movement are noted throughout the play; Lady Chiltern, for instance, is a member of the

Woman's Liberal Association. Although Lord Goring makes fun of their association when he says that the only thing they do is watching the bonnets of each other, Lady Chiltern replies with a similar sense of mockery by stating they do quite an important job. She clearly humiliates much of the current system which takes any act for- and by women for granted: "Oh! dull, useful, delightful things, Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise" (II p. 70). This answer may cause the audience to feel unsure of whether she supports or disdains the women's rights. Meanwhile, same Lady Chiltern states that she and her husband stress out the necessity of women's high education. This support is a reflection of Wilde's own opinions related to women's education, which he gave place in his articles published in *The Woman's World* magazine. This magazine was a platform for Wilde to speak out the rights women possess in public and private sphere; they must receive education in connection to that. Mabel is referred to as "remarkably modern", "a little too modern, perhaps" (II p. 83). The reason why Mabel is called modern is her judgmental attitude against conventional morals. The morality she promotes, hence, will be rooted in independent thinking, her mockingly rebuff of the candidate who wants her, and her acceptance of a variety of individualistic values. Mabel draws quite a modern portrait in relation to matrimony as well. She makes fun of Tommy Trafford as he proposes marriage to her periodically. Besides, she has feelings for Goring, and as a female, reveals this without believing it should be a secret. By the time Goring comes to propose to her at last, she gives her consent, stating that she will allow him to be the man he wants to be. What he has become will not possibly be the "ideal" figure of a husband, but this will not matter because the thing called ideal husband is, for her, "something in the next world" (IV p. 171). Her comment is obviously a reflection of Wilde's perception on the categorization of the husbands as the ideal – and not ideal - ones. There is not, and cannot be, "perfect" men and women, and society must get accustomed to this. By employing the character of Mabel in the play, Wilde aims to demolish the socially constructed traits of both women and men, an act similar to the one he did during his writing for *The Woman's World*.

The concern of a man over professional matters is a theme not only Wilde but also other late Victorian writers subject in their works. Wilde does it for the first time in *An Ideal Husband* with Sir Robert Chiltern and his secret. The play thematizes this young man's obsession, rather than passion, for career. Currently, Sir Chiltern is remembered as a man of "high character, high moral tone, high principles" (IV p. 159), but years before, he did indecent actions for reputation and money.

All comedy plays of Wilde touch upon the unrealistic features society attributes to women and men, and try to turn them into ideal-shaped mates. What happens eventually is a collection of imaginary expectations from both sides. The high ideals Lady Chiltern possesses about her husband, Sir Chiltern can be shown as one example to this. Lady Chiltern glorifies her husband in all terms. At a time when he hesitates whether to accept the political offer he gets or not, she forces him to "be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away - that tower of ivory do not destroy" (I p. 51). Wilde's emphasis of "ivory tower" is significant here in terms of the unattainable ideals Lady Chiltern feeds in her mind. Sir Chiltern succumbs to Mrs. Cheveley's threat since he is aware of the possible consequences otherwise; if Lady Chiltern and society found out the evidence of his guilt from the past, his whole marriage and career would be hurt. He reproves all high expectations wives, and social values in general, expect husbands must carry. For him, this much load causes men to finally fall over. He claims that he loves Lady Chiltern as she is, with her good and bad sides. On the other hand, she strives to put him into a shape which he is really not. In relationships, acceptance in love has to be the ultimate aim and starting point, not the idealized gender figures. This statement is ironic in another way, too; because it has generally been women, not men, who have been pushed, criticized and tried to be processed into ideal shapes, in both physical and behavioral patterns. Wilde employs another powerful paradox at this point.

The fulfillment of ideals, as previously discussed, was not a new concept for the late Victorian culture. A married man was supposed to be constantly loyal, powerful and truthful. Besides, the New Woman emerging in the late nineteenth century expected a transparent past life together with his current life. This must have made the New Woman even more relentless. Coming to Lady Chiltern, one

does not witness the construct of female remission, not because she does not prefer but because Wilde does not put her in a situation requiring the performance of forgiving. Another gender trait is deconstructed here- not by harsh criticism; rather, with undermining the value attributed to female forgiveness. Apparently, it is understandable that the belief that a woman- or man- guilty of moral preferences must make amends is held by Lady Chiltern. On one hand, Lady Chiltern reminds the audience of the correct male figure by telling the ways she has always idealized her husband. On the other, her husband shows many discrepancies with that ideal by proving he is an unreliable political authority; hence, unreliable as the household “authority” figure as well. Wilde impels the audience to realize that Lady Chiltern is ought to get free from the construct of ideal mate in her imagination as this is the only way to see the shifting nature of reality. Goring, in a manner of the dandy, appreciates her upon this act at the end. In the play, the gender constructs characters idealize are all dependent on the social codes of conduct; so they belong to a major degree of idealizing structure, rather than the ones based on various individual dreams. As well as Sir Chiltern who infringes the concept of a moral man, other characters ignore or overthrow the typical gender behaviors. Baron Arnheim can be recognized as a forthcoming character to break the boundaries. The minor characters, Nanjac and Montford are not “strong” enough to lift anything heavy. Phipps, the servant, exists on the surface of the plot but his physical presence is missing. So, which male character will embody the decent masculinity? Coming to the proper womanhood, society figures, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon subvert the innocent lady-like womanhood with several sexual schemes. They are pretty aware of their cheating as they talk to each other:

Mrs. Marchmont (With a sigh): Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!

Lady Basildon (Emphatically): Yes, always to others, have we not? (I p. 29)

Actually, all women in the play think the idealized man who Lady Chiltern is after is both dull and tedious; Lady Chiltern’s dream husband is not merely theoretical, but also ridiculous. This figure, especially in the beginning of the play, is like a monument in Lady Chiltern’s eyes, while it is a dummy for the

other female characters. What is constructed as “ideal”, in this sense, is examined through the scale of conformity and is understood in a formal mode, not in a substantial one. The reality society constructs contradicts with the real-life performance of manhood. One can assert that Lady Chiltern has been fooled by the false reality she herself creates till the last act of the play.

The aims behind Wilde’s thrust of the conventional gender ideals to the forefront are, clearly, demonstration of the inequity masculine domination performs on the formation of these roles; Lady Chiltern depends her dignity on those ideals unless they are protested. The second point states, indeed, that an intrinsic anxiety against the female potential ignites the plot since the reason why she needs to be instructed due to her ideals remains unclear. The idealism followed does not have any grounds other than social expectations. What is anticipated of Lady Chiltern is not forgetting about the construct of an ideal husband she made up in her mind, but she is merely directed towards a reanalysis of that. A traditionally “romantic” ending, which is the union of the female and the male, awaits us; however, many unusual dialogues which undermine the unjust gender attributions have been made till then. The message given through this contradiction is that although the final act ends in the anticipated way, marriage, the allocation of gender traits in moral terms is left incomplete, which opens it to reevaluation. While the general frame of setting and characters are in accordance with the romantic comedy tradition and cause the audience to have the expectancies as in a traditional Victorian romantic comedy play, both male and female characters overwrite the fixed identities morally imposed upon them.

3.3 Marriage and Social Customs in Gender Construction

While Wilde was being tried in court, his play, *An Ideal Husband*, was being put on the stage on one of the most famous London theaters, West End. In the play, gender and phallogocentric constructs are recognized. In one such instance, Sir Robert Chiltern, who is rather quiet in normal occasions, scolds his wife in Act II because of her strict morality in marriage and her seek for the usefulness of everything. He had loved his wife “wildly”; however, he asks in a frustrated manner;

“Why can’t you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men: but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. . .” (II p. 97)

Sir Chiltern wants his wife to “love” him unconditionally. It is a weird desire as for being beyond the politics of relationships, marriages and love of the time. In the final act, the couple come back together due to the fact that Lady Chiltern does not desire her husband to refrain from his career; she does not want to quit being an assistant to the leading party, either. She forgives him. Women have to be pardoning and merciful. While Sir Chiltern is busy sitting and thinking, she approaches him. At that moment, he wants to learn if she feels mere love or pity for him, and she gives the answer of “love”, adding that a new life is beginning for both of them. Indeed, they are required to live a life outside the political and social system valid in their day if they really ought to make a new start. This does not happen in reality. Yet, especially Lady Chiltern appreciates a change in their lives, which can be read as a presumption Wilde foresees in the contexts of womanhood, manhood and marital relations. These terms, together with the idea of love and devotion, are definitely prone to be undermined, and re-evaluated.

In the play, not only the main characters but also the minors, such as Lord Caversham and Lady Markby, are the means by which the audience would notice the differences between the traditional gender perceptions. They constantly mention what used to happen in the past. Despite their insistence on values, the younger ones call them into question. While Lady Basildon declares the requirements to be found in women, Lady Markby talks about the sad consequences of cross-class marriages. While telling about a story of a rich girl and a curate, she says: “we girls saw them [curates], of course, running about the place like rabbits. But we never took any notice of them, I need hardly say” (II p. 89). Lord Caversham is on the conservative side of marrying. Goring gets his idea on the possibility of choosing a wife of his own accord. Lord Caversham’s answer is not surprising: “It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life” (III p. 112). This reply is a clear summary of the perception of marriages in the Victorian period, especially of the upper class people. It

might not have been openly declared in all circumstances, but was still there. Wilde's aim in making his characters speak of the ill attitudes toward relationships is surely to bring forth a critical aspect of manhood, womanhood, and the ways they connect with each other. We see a satirized scenery of the old – and ongoing- social norms and their impact on the ways being a woman and a man is perceived. The Duchess of Berwick and her perception of matrimony in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is satirized. *An Ideal Husband* issues the same criticism by having the characters discuss about the customs and traditions of the past. Both the generation gap and difference of perceptions get Lord Caversham and Lord Goring into argument on love and marriage. Wilde reveals his own ideas through Lord Goring's mockeries.

It is hinted in the play that recently, scandalous activities do not render many women remorseful; they see them as opportunities to make their names the other way round. Some women even like it. Goring replies to Sir Chiltern's concern about whether Mrs. Cheveley would be upset at the rumors about her: "I am sure she adores scandals, and that the sorrow of her life at present is that she can't manage to have enough of them" (II p. 67). Wilde here ridicules how late Victorian people, whether women or men, are fed by rumors that spread like waves and turn into speaking materials. Touching upon the construction of genders, rumors are the evidence of the power society holds in shaping people's ideas. A person tends to believe in what s/he hears, and judge whether or not men/women behave in accordance with those constructs formed by rumors. People are renowned by means of scandals. More, women can be as adventurous as men are in their approach to social affairs. In the Late Victorian society, appearing moral was indispensable to one's social stance. This was a mania, part of the fashion. After so much falsity, however, people began to disappear from the society one by one, becoming devastated and falling victims to scandalous affairs. As Mrs. Cheveley says: "Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man—now they crush him" (I p. 38). By presenting scandalous activities as being double sided, Wilde deconstructs the credibility of manhood. Falsity used to be known as an act with which a man would brag; yet, it brings about weakness and loss of reputation.

Another issue, which Goring is also aware of, is that relationships are not always “legal” as predicted. Illegal relationships are as common as marriages. For Goring, these secret relationships are a “necessary luxury” in modern life. He points out an ironic social phenomenon in the Victorian society- for men, it is common and probable to commit extramarital affairs, whereas women are deemed despicable and metaphorically executed. Goring’s father, on the other hand, states marrying is “a matter of common sense” (II p. 113), which, to him, is not found in women; women do not carry common sense at all, since it is exclusive to males only. Here lies a paradox; how come do women follow after a tradition so filled with common sense then? From Goring’s perspective, women with common sense are very “plain”, he thinks acting on it is not really for them. Indeed, Goring makes light of marriage in his conversation with his father; the reason why he does not propose Mabel is that he is “of a very nervous disposition, especially in the morning” (IV p. 142). He mockingly insults how corrupt male thought in its attempt to implement unjust perceptions of gender identities.

Not only Goring himself but also his father makes a mockery of marriage. While attempting to elevate the idea of marriage in his son’s mind, he uses these words: “Why, when I was your age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three months and was already paying my addresses to your admirable mother” (III p. 105). As Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* also elaborates on, Lord Caversham gets to the point that marriage is the product of common sense. This demonstrates the value Victorian society attributes to material goods, which, in turn, produces gender behaviors as commonly performed. Men try to perform the role of an ideal husband candidate, whereas women try to be the obedient, angelic match to the man they wait for.

Wilde parodies the fake nature of the rules established to regulate human behavior. Sir Chiltern reminds that the rules for the public and politics are necessarily separate, but Lady Chiltern insists that ideally, there has to be one common set of rules for both because both serve for the welfare of humanity. Politics, just as the moral principles that teach how to become gendered, is a lie. While Lady Chiltern aggressively tells her husband that “circumstances should never alter principles” (I p. 50), she reminds how rules seem fixed and

irreplaceable in the society. Her obedient, rule-abiding ways fit with the women's traditional role in the Victorian society. Her deep concern with staying married is another example to her recognition of marriage as a rule-based institutions and willingness to stick onto it. Mabel's reference to the London Society as being composed of "beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics" echoes here (I p. 9). This is what a society is supposed to consist of. This is an obvious reference to fake masks people wear during their social exchanges. Both women and men are compelled to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances, which in turn reinforces the gender binaries drawn by the societal organs. Beside the decision-makers and rules people are moulded through, there is no need to search for spies among the society any more, the press does it fine, Sir Chiltern says. They spy into people's lives and annoy by using the information they gather.

In the Victorian society where only the two genders are formally recognized and given shape, marrying more than once has been a popular activity, Lady Markby stresses out in a mocking manner. She also mocks Lady Chiltern's husband while asking: "Dear Duchess, and how is the Duke? Brain still weak, I suppose? Well, that is only to be expected, is it not? His good father was just the same. There is nothing like race, is there?" (I p. 3). As a Victorian woman, Lady Markby's insolent approach towards men is remarkable and demonstrates the audience a commentary untypical of a woman. Her expression that the Duke, his father, and any other man lacks brain proves her courage in revealing her thoughts. Besides, having had two "bad" husbands before only makes Mrs Cheveley a more experienced woman on these kind of men. Far from being a problem, "they amused [her] immensely" (III p. 127). In other words, she ridicules the heavy meaning on marriage as an activity moral women and men should get into only once in life. Indeed, due to her weak financial condition and meanwhile being single, Mrs. Cheveley pressurized Goring to involve in a relationship with her in the past, a condition which can hardly be named spontaneous. She desired to set her way via this wedlock. She always kept in her mind that Goring was not willing to marry from the heart. From this perspective, turning an "expectedly" emotion-based courtship into a deal for settlement shows how she frustrates the ways to and rules of marriage. In this

way, she both acquires the financial comfort she needs and refrains from leading a marriage totally out of love and suffering the burden of obligations, as many women did in the late Victorian century. Besides, she had stolen the snake figured brooch, a present to be given to Lord Goring's cousin during her marriage ceremony. This implies how insignificant marriage ceremony is to her, as she has no attachment and respect to the ways via which people attribute value to it. The brooch shaped in a snake consisting of diamonds may also be interpreted as the hazards of marriage itself. It may give damage to both women and men because the imposed concept of marriage contributes to attribution of separate duties to the sexes in all terms and conditions; beside this, it affirms the distinction of sexes and the alleged obligation of keeping company with an opposite sex only. Mrs. Cheveley gets married in the end, but it is highly possible that she agreed on it only after she consumed her resources coming from the maintenance payment. She re-pursues marriage with a drive of financial expectations. In the final scene, she insists she had always loved Goring while she blackmails him, this is her way of leading him into marriage. As stated in the play, Mrs. Cheveley's personality, attractiveness and intelligence could have resulted in her becoming "a general"; however, she is a woman. So, she is expected to exhibit her skills in marriage and relationships.

Wilde never issues adultery as a practice far from relationships. All relationships, the ones on the way to marriage emphasized, are considered by Wilde as a game. That is why all relationships Wilde gives place in his plays involve playful acts like seducing or humorous courtships. In his works, ironies and paradoxes abound in order to undermine the components of romance, love, and the supposedly strong emotions love affairs give way to. For instance, *An Ideal Husband* opens its curtains with the decoration of a Rococo tapestry on the wall behind. The tapestry is imprinted with the representation of a painting, "Triumph of Love", which is clearly supposed to stand for love and its dominating power. It is a symbolic piece of decoration, as it represents subtle meanings underlying love. Although the tapestry may carry such deep meanings, it is ironically a mere object of decoration for a party given in the evening. The position of the tapestry, when applied to the play from a larger perspective, can be seen similar to the way love is viewed during the time the

play was written. It is degraded, simplified, even turned into a flat “object” because of the marriages compulsorily made to fulfill the gender roles. It is idealized solely in verbal utterances. The illusive aspect of love and romance in courtships is demonstrated by the teasing language characters use in expressing their flirtation, or, for instance, the sway of wording between Lord Goring and Mabel. Wilde aims to point out the fragility and weakness of the basis of marriages made in his period, the late nineteenth century, as marriage was the “fundamental” aim of relationships of the time.

Wilde disregards and underrates any norm or tradition that forms the construct of marriage, since he perceives them to be counterfeit. Even though a marriage is going fine in his plays, he demonstrates the aspects of that marriage which are ornamented and encouraged by several lies. Mabel makes a good example for that. She comments on her marriage with Goring, hoping he will hide secrets from her as they marry, because she does not wish an “ideal” husband. Wilde’s witty characters such as Mabel never aims to match with an ideal spouse. As Laura Fernanda Bulger comments, “. . . the end-of-the-century dandy, who is a sceptic in relation to everything, does not waste time searching for the ideal woman because he does not believe she exists” (2001). The same comment suits Mabel’s approach to the opposite sex as a woman.

Wilde explicitly turns over the constructs of purity in sexual identities and loyalty in marriages in *An Ideal Husband*. As Claudia Johnson argues, “Wilde reverses the idea of pure women made impure, with always flawed men wanting them to be like virginal roses, and makes it the idea of ideal men shown to be really corrupt, with naive women urging them to be the saints” (1988, p. 208). Similar to the characterization of a traditional husband who cannot tolerate one error his wife makes in their marriage, such as adultery, Lady Chiltern feels it beneath her to face her husband’s shattering image she had always enlivened in her mind. Only after a burden of thought is she persuaded in the construct that women are to be unconditionally merciful.

3.4 Parent-Child Relationship and Gender

A significant impact on the formation of male gender is certainly father-son relationship. Lady Markby observes that fathers and sons seem so distant from

each other. While some fathers do not communicate with their sons, some sons are unwilling to share anything with their fathers. She comments: “. . . there are so many sons who won't have anything to do with their fathers, and so many fathers who won't speak to their sons. I think myself, it is very much to be regretted” (II p. 89). This is a sad situation for Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley replies with a manner unexpected from a traditional Victorian woman: “So do I. Fathers have so much to learn from their sons nowadays” (II p. 89). The truth is that fathers should learn many things from their sons, one of them being the “the art of living”. In modern society, newer generations are different from the older ones, and fathers must accept this fact. Wilde touches on how influential the core of societies, families, are on the creation of men.

Parents contributed to their children's gender formation by structuring, modeling and labeling. In the play, Goring's father orders him to marry, his age is already suitable for that. Marrying is his “duty”. His peers are all married. It is not possible to live forever single, he will have to quit chasing pleasures at some point, because those living for pleasure have recently been revealed amongst people. They have attention on them. Goring's reply is belittling enough: “Yes, father, but I only admit to thirty-two—thirty-one and a half when I have a really good buttonhole. This buttonhole is not . . . trivial enough” (III p. 105). He equates the necessity of marrying with having buttonholes, which renders one of the utmost duties of a man pointless and trivial. Besides that, Goring's father constantly calls him “sir” like he sees him in a respectable position, whose truthfulness can easily be questioned.

Beside the urge on marriage, the evidential influence of fathers on becoming a man is Goring's father. He does not seem like leaving the decision of when, how, and whom to marry to his son. He declares that he himself would define the route, as his son would be incapable of choosing the right one. Possessions and belongings are the matter of marriages, not emotions. They are to come only after the issue of properties. As a man himself, Goring's father is pretty sure he uses common sense frequently. Goring has the opposite view. As for his mother, the father does not show any implication of common sense. The understanding of a typically attributed trait is exchanged here in a humorous way.

On Goring's side, the truth is that he cannot tolerate much seeing his father in subsequent days. He does not believe father must be seen often, or listened to. Only this way can one lead a happy family life. On the other hand, a mother is like lover to him; he wishes to see her all the time. Fathers typically exist as figures to be respected, followed, and listened to. They like to, or have to, sermonize on every subject. As mentioned, the first thing Goring's father does as he comes in is to insinuate. His son, to him, wastes all his time with trivial things. After his insistence on Goring's deciding when to marry, Goring mocks the pressure put on him, and indeed all men. His engagement just before the marriage would take place "not yet: but [he] hope[s] to be before lunch-time" (IV p. 139). Goring's father commentates on youth as if it is a vain process, being of no use for humanity. He is probably worried about the possibility of destruction young people are into, he does not trust in their decision making. Goring contemplates on youth in a similar way; he is too young to marry, he cannot decide on a marriage at such a young age. His father blames him of being too wayward; indeed, youth for Goring is the food for imagination and emotion. The father does not look like such a supporter of emotional inclinations. Lord Caversham being the representative of social pressure on gender performances, Wilde trivializes him to the extent where the norms he teaches his son are not valued.

3.5 Women and Supposed Inferiority

A Victorian woman verbally gained identity by the time womanly traits were attributed to her, which were the echoing of patriarchal expectations. Though there existed many differences between men and women, these were expressed in part with reference to the social circumstances, which also drew the border of the differences and determined how they were applicable. The concept of reality is questionable here. When people think of a thing or person, they indeed think of that as much as it relates to them. Even when we claim something to be real, we actually view it so in relation to the belief we have on it. However, belief is not always knowledge. For example, Mabel Chiltern dislikes the way Lord Goring perceives Mrs. Cheveley; that is, "a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night" (I p. 28). This is not realistic, not "natural", and not possible to

become true. The reference is to the idea that being many things at the same time, especially for a woman, is out of line. Sir Chiltern argues that for Mrs. Cheveley, talking about political subjects is both “tedious and practical”, two terms that do not necessarily coexist, though Wilde juxtaposes them on purpose to empty the attribution to seriousness. As a woman, her enjoyment is not imagined to be in practical subjects. The way she replies him is a sign of her sharp wit, as what she does not take delight in is not the subjects but the people who are boring (I p. 32). Sir Chiltern’s amusement leads us to the categorization of skills across genders.

Lady Markby says in Act I that “the Season produces a kind of softening of the brain” (I p. 42). It makes people dull. A lot of intellectuality puts weight on the shoulders, which creates problems. Actually, girls are affected by these circumstances as they may have their nose in the air due to knowing too much. Men do not want to marry these types of girls, they may be threatening for male intellectuality. A classic representation of female obedience to men is the assumption that Lady Chiltern must not be estranged from Sir Chiltern, as a woman’s place is her husband’s side. This moral sensitivity of women, surely, renders marriage an inadequate activity to which they tightly cling. Gender stereotypes serve to demonstrate men as superior to women by attributing different skills to the sexes. Our beliefs linked to our status within the society nourish social differentiations, forming the characteristics of those statuses at the end. In this case, gender roles are differentiations about which people develop beliefs. These beliefs the Victorians held affected them not only in collaborative living settings, but also in their individual tasks whose outcomes would be reviewed by others. They certainly categorized any person they communicated with reference to their sex. This categorization might have directed women’s and men’s performances at any task as well. For instance, when a task was promoted as a masculine one, women would be left out as they could not be as skillful as men at the same task. When outcome expectancies regarding separate genders are placed on equal grounds, distinctions in gender roles could vanish. Therefore, the attribution that any woman, including Lady Chiltern, is bound to remain within marriage is the reflection of a traditional gender specification, which is damaged by other characters’ harsh criticism and

later, by Lady Chiltern's derogation of the attributions made to women. Just as Mrs. Cheveley touches on the conventions loaded on women, they are always condemned to live under the effect of their past lives. They are bound to carry out the price of their former deeds, if there are any. By the time she marries, she bounds herself to a single man, and is expected to pass her whole remaining life subdued by him.

Female characters in Wilde have various aims, and they reach these aims in different ways. Mrs. Cheveley and Mrs. Erlynne, for example, are charming and apparently seducing women in their mid-ages, and they both look for a suitable person to marry. Mrs. Erlynne attracts Lord Augustus's attention by using both her sexual guilt and her assertion as a personal trait. The way she flirts with Lord Augustus is humorous in that she has him to wrongly believe in that he is the one who mostly undertakes the flirting job. Lord Augustus can be resembled to a clown by the physical appearance and clothing. He is not totally sure whether he has married once and divorced twice, or married twice and divorced once; now he desires to get married again with Mrs. Erlynne. She succeeds in assuring Lord Augustus of her purity and morality, though there are many past deeds which seemingly prove the opposite. The moment she was captured in Lord Darlington's house is another implication for that. Lord Augustus can be representing the traditional perspective of the upper class society in a sense. The incidents when Mrs. Erlynne clearly rules over Lord Augustus are pointers of female power over male in relationships; plus, they can be minor embodiments of the real face of the society. Such humorous marriages, which are made fun of, show how ridiculous and satiric society itself is, because society dictates, and surely accepts, these kind of relationships. Notably, Mrs. Erlynne is able to "acquire" Lord Augustus; on the contrary, Mrs. Cheveley loses Lord Goring not to get back. He cancels their engagement irretrievably since he finds out her relationship with somebody even though she receives a huge amount of maintenance in return for a break of engagement promise. Quite a shrewd man, Lord Goring does not get allured by wealth as Lord Augustus does. He is conscious of the fact that Mrs. Cheveley sounded him out just because of the unlucky result she got when she blackmailed Sir Chiltern. In order to save Sir Chiltern's reputation, she tries to threaten Goring to marry her. Chiltern himself

does not show the sufficient effort to relieve. She does not have a problem of finance as she is wealthy enough to carry on, but apparently wishes Goring's dignity and reputed name beside her for suiting her social position. She informs that she feels tired of living abroad and wants to return to London, where she desires obtaining a charming house and a salon (III p. 126). Mrs. Cheveley's assertive character, and her marriage and settlement proposal to Lord Goring, are examples of the ways through which Wilde transposes the roles of gender identities. Mrs. Cheveley affirms the heartbreak she caused in Lord Goring in the past. In spite of this, she alleges his importance, by saying he has been the only person she really cared for. Lord Goring does not take this proposal too seriously, though, because he believes it is not an honest one. This scene is also a satire of the typical theme of temptation, where the woman, embodiment of purity and innocence, surrenders herself to a "bad" man due to a state of selflessness. On the day of marriage, Mrs. Cheveley gives her word on delivering Sir Chiltern's letter. The humorous matter here is even though the person complaining is quite material-oriented, the one to be complained of is more than that. Hence, Mrs. Cheveley's aims come to naught.

Men, and especially women characters in Wilde's plays do not follow a common path for tempting, deceiving, or persuading others. This must not be a coincidence, as Wilde himself does not follow ways of categorizing, dissociating, or differentiating in his character's manners and personalities. He merely observes and takes them down. For instance, Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley appear to be "bad" women who similarly seek their own profits, but while Mrs. Erlynne receives the "honor" of getting married and reaching a "happy" end, Mrs. Cheveley's true identity is revealed and her aims are learnt by everyone. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, during advocating her daughter Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne expresses her deep remorse. However, she may possibly repeat the same, or similar "dirty" actions after she marries and settles down. It should be remembered that Wilde implicitly situates in his characters both pure and evil. The double-sidedness is inseparable to humanity, and these traits are not necessarily to be defined as proper or improper.

In the play, despite the fact that the two main female characters, Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, follow totally opposite directions on moral grounds, they

intimidate the traditional setting of the play by invading the public sphere dominated by men and trying to exercise their own wishes. They damage the authority imposed by men. Wilde's initial depiction of these women may seem to reinforce a traditional female vulnerability and obedience. Male characters are permitted to find explanations to their actions, while females receive what is provided. Sir Chiltern, though reprimanded at first, is cleared and granted the opportunity of improvement. In Act IV, Goring suggests Lady Chiltern's accusation of Sir Chiltern is invalid, saying a woman's forgiveness regarding a man's faults is everything that is expected of women. Lady Chiltern is almost about to establish her moral position somewhere beyond Sir Chiltern's and fulfill Mrs. Cheveley's supposition that these women are to regulate men. Men construct good women and bad ones; Lady Chiltern makes her mind on choosing her husband's side, while Mrs. Cheveley is an alienated woman again. The point here is the plot that keeps these female figures so far from the social frame of morality in general goes unnoticed. To illustrate, Sir Chiltern commits a deed an honored man should not, but rather than that, he becomes sad upon its revelation. He shows this with his question to Lord Goring: "Whom did I wrong by what I did?", and supports it with the answer: "I felt I had fought the century with its own weapons, and won" (II p. 63). Hence, he proves that his wife's belief in him and a solid relationship, elevated with "proper" male traits, is to be maintained on surface and his evolution into a good man is not real. He ironically yields in blackmail by a woman, too. Goring's stance by Sir Chiltern's side is another proof of deceiving male power supported by lies. Mrs. Cheveley, however, is probably the best proof in terms of the inapplicability of social norms as Goring overcomes her blackmail by using her guilt of stealing.

The gender limits brought by the society is existent within various situations in the play. Goring's argument against Lady Chiltern that a man's life is more valuable than a woman's is an obvious evidence of it. Despite that, Mrs. Cheveley features her courage and apathy to the typical women's roles in her conversations with the couple, and releases her tricks in her communication with Goring. She continuously trespasses the well-crafted, pure female stereotype. Her actions cannot exactly be linked to flaunting; she wants to reflect an extraordinary individualism untypical of the women in her society.

Her high attitudes render her a threat in the eyes of others. She manages very well to perform in the financial and political fields. Her skill to adapt to the requirements of various spheres, beside her inclinations to draw her own path, definitely disrupt the construct of woman within the ordering of genders. This can be viewed as a core conflict in the play. Much more essential than the peace in the Chilterns' house is the gender order. Mrs. Cheveley is a sharp character in fulfilling the violation of this order.





4. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST: COURTSHIPS RIDICULED

The third play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894), seriously undermines and ridicules gender identities of the late Victorian period. Women, despite seeming to obey the traditional gender rules, exhibit anti-traditional conduct in their aggressive and assertive attitudes towards relationships and marriages. Men, who are the so-called maintainers of the social order, create fake identities and take shelter in them in order to pull away from the morals being injected on them. These subversive attitudes are the reflections of Wilde's criticism of the hypocrisy of the period. *The Importance of Being Earnest* abounds with characters who may also be regarded as the stereotypes of the writings of the time, but Wilde deconstructs their traditional stances and the values on which they build their lives, which renders them atypical at the end.

Wilde's comedies have a common point in that courtships are never led in earnestness, but frivolously. The audience is allowed to take delight in the use of witty words and phrases, while being exempt from making in-depth analyses of gender traits. His satirical take on implies that all courtship is deceit, an illusion. Wilde likes to hold an "indecent" stance and strengthens the notion that although his characters carry out seemingly good intentions, they would face separation, or divorce unless they employ a degree of trickery in their actions. From this perspective, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered as Wilde's best satire. The plot mocks the concept of love and courtships as shallow factors. Deceit is surely a key theme around which most events occur throughout the play. The most striking example should be Gwendolyn and Cecily's desire to intentionally get tricked into the ideal of man called "Ernest". In addition to that, Algernon and Jack are more than willing to be christened for earning that name, convincing the women with this construct of "earnestness" at the end. Not only Algernon and Jack, but also Gwendolyn and Cecily perceive courtships as trivial as possible. Actually, many typical actions of men are ridiculed by women.

In a ridiculous scene, Gwendolyn and Cecily, two young girls, debate over who will be the one to get engaged to a man with the name “Ernest” as if it is the most serious topic to be referred to. This scene reminds us of the traditional fight men perform in the situation of getting the woman they both want. In line with these trivial incidents, the flirtations in the play are designed in humorously implausible ways. In Wilde’s comedies except *The Importance of Being Earnest*, humorous incidents are presented mainly through words. This play makes a difference in that characters’ comic design is as noteworthy as the words used. More, in the play, “the scale of ironies becomes larger, which makes the play more daring and exceptional in its style than its predecessors” (Pestka, 1989, p. 185). The complexity of humor is rooted in this fact and this is the reason why this play is Wilde’s most popular comedy. It gives out “absurd remarks uttered inadvertently, and unexpected verbal reactions” by almost all the characters (pp. 180-1).

It may not suffice to call *The Importance of Being Earnest* as an unusual play. Its style and structure is also referred to as different from its kinds. Wilde employs a variety of details from the mainstream drama of his age in his construction of the play, just as he did in his previous works. Indeed, some scenes in the play include direct references to works staged earlier. For instance, the act of “drowning” in J.M. Morton's *Box and Cox* (1841), which is a single act farcical play, can be directly connected with the act of Bunburying by Algernon and Jack. Similar to the scene of realization in *Box and Cox*, Algernon and Jack realize at the end of the play that they are brothers. Another previous example is Boucicault’s *London Assurance* (1841), in which Charles Courtly displays two different identities; one for his courtships in the country, and one for his activities in town. More, *A Lover by Proxy* (1842) by Boucicault employs two unoccupied men, Harry Lawless and Peter Blushington, which shows a parallelism with *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Boucicault’s play involves two female characters who demonstrate sharp likeness to Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell as well. Hence, Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* was inspired by some former works of the British comedy.

George Bernard Shaw criticized Wilde: “. . . the general effect is that of a farcical comedy dating from the seventies, unplayed during that period because

it was too clever and too decent, and brought up to date as far as possible by Mr. Wilde in his not completely formed style” (1895, pp. 249-50). However, from a different standpoint, it is undeniable that these former comedy plays direct criticism and presumptuousness towards the conservative and hypocritical society of the Victorian period. These plays shed light on the financial base on which marriage and engagement unions are made, and show how the sentiments expected to feed the relationships are neglected and mocked. Hence, the form Wilde chose for his plays may appear traditional in style; however, the viewpoints and stances he presented were obviously not.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one can also see the modern drama conventions. Wilde had used the techniques parallel to historical drama in his early plays, *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* such as plot structure and technical scene details. *The Importance of Being Earnest* abounds with techniques from the melodramas of the Victorian period. Especially the stock characters of the melodrama genre, such as the abandoned baby – Jack, an orphan girl - Cecily, the mother as the spokesperson of the society - Lady Bracknell, even the ineloquent elder maidservant - Miss Prism appear in the play. The plot is notable as a product of melodrama on its own; characters fight for “true love” despite the class issues, the roots of one of the main characters are unknown, the happy truth that he belongs to the high society is exposed in the final scene, which brings about understanding and harmony. There happens an implausible consequence regarding a baby’s disappearance within a suitcase, two separate identities of two main characters make the audience query which image is real and which one is not, and there are two young female characters who are impeccably virtuous. On the other hand, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is regarded as a work more advanced than Wilde’s earlier plays, too, with respect to the thematic scheme it is structured with. It contains the themes that a social play is expected to, the most significant of them being the regretful secret of the main character, his social liability, and his anxiety about the possibility of being revealed. Algernon and Jack live their lives with their guilty secret, as Mrs. Erlynne and Sir Robert Chiltern do. Jack tells everybody that he visits his – imaginary- brother named Ernest, who lives in the town. Similarly, Algernon pretends to spend time with his friend Bunbury in the country. Thus, Gwendolen

supposes that Jack is actually "Ernest" in the town and Cecily thinks of Algernon as "Ernest" in the country. This secret comes to surface by the time Cecily and Gwendolyn get into touch in the country; none of the men is Ernest in name and personality. Cecily feels deceived when she says to Gwendolen, "A gross deception has been practised on both of us" (II p. 85). After the confession that he did not have any brother in reality, Jack admits: ". . . it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind" (II pg. 85). If Jack did not utter these words, we might have thought they were also said by Mrs. Erlynne, or Sir Robert Chiltern, since they do not follow a way of reflecting their true selves, either. As a result of the tricks of Algernon and Jack, the rest of the characters face far more different consequences than the ones experienced in the other plays. For instance, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs. Erlynne would forever lose the chance to marry Lord Augustus and be deprived of her daughter's love and respect. In *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Chiltern would suffer the loss of his political status in the parliament and violate his own career path. For Algernon and Jack, however, their revelation only meant a temporal postponement in their involvement of courtship practices. It can actually be stated that in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde mocks a situation which he portrayed as an essential matter in his previous works. Despite the serious attitudes and conversations characters hold, the hidden truth is an unimportant one. Neither this secret nor its revelation stimulates an important confusion concerning the others, or the society in general, and this differentiates the play from Wilde's former plays. By the inversion of humorous elements, Wilde could simply shed light on the folly going on in the Victorian perceptions of gender.

4.1 Marriage as a Requirement for Gender Performance

Not only in the late Victorian society, but throughout the Victorian period in general, marriage was regarded as a legal gate to sexual life for all adults, either female or male. It led to the birth and flourishing of family units, and provided directions for how to "gender" people in household, and in public. In other words, it is a realm where women and men practise the gender requirements. As

the sub-title of the play employs the words “serious” and “trivial” together, Wilde makes sure he concurrently puts them into effect. He uses social and private issues like marriage, class connections, or financial matters, to deconstruct the gender roles women and men perform throughout the social layers. He focuses his criticism especially on matrimony which he considers as a boring, demoralizing, and even deceptive practice. Even from the start of the play, he makes this obvious:

Algernon: Why is it that at a bachelor’s establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

Lane: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

Algernon: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

Lane: I believe it is a very pleasant state, Sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person. (I p. 1-2)

Algernon and Lane, his servant, speak of matrimony in a trivializing manner here, undermining the idealized views of it. They describe marriage as a misunderstanding between two people, and this devaluates what society elevates and crowns with marriage at the end. Moreover, Lane’s marriage apparently does not earn him any experience with respect to relationships. As a man, he does not feel happy or lucky to have experienced one. The subject of this comedy relates to marriages and courtships, but it opens directly by focusing on the disadvantages of them both. A humorous incongruity is given here as a solid reality with the aim of reflecting comical elements as of a huge significance. Though the expectation is referencing to matrimony as a product of “mutual understanding” as generally called, Lane’s marriage was placed on a huge misunderstanding. Wilde defends that marriages are doomed to end because of the indispensable web of misunderstandings awaiting the couples. It is a gender problem regarding heterosexually separate expectations and desires. Women expect to gain financial freedom and a good social reputation as they marry; for men, it is a field where they bring their masculinity into reality. Even the lower class people, who are known as the supporters of morals, do not fulfill their traditional gender roles properly.

Another sentence by Algernon, stating that divorces are made in heaven, is a straightforward mockery of marriage, "Marriages are made in heaven". In addition, Jack and Gwendolen's flirtation worries Algernon, the reason is because it is not appropriate to see each other often without marriage. However, Algernon cannot see any romance in Jack's intention to propose to Gwendolen since he reminds that marriage stands as a business, not a matter of love. Wilde manifests the material perception of marriage via Algernon.

Classes play the most important role in Victorian marriages. In Victorian society, social class is determining factor. It would be scandalous when a woman or man from the upper class attempted to marry someone from lower classes. Significantly, marriage was perceived as a door to social acceptance. Marrying for financial gains was also quite common. For Lady Bracknell, marriage arrangements are never a problem and must be made by paying attention to class levels. This is the ultimate way they "become" proper husbands and wives. The younger characters; namely, Algernon, Jack, Gwendolyn and Cecily seem to hold the same view as she does throughout the majority of the play; however, they complain about it in their inner selves at the same time. They apparently recognize some errors inherent in the social system, but the way they were brought up lead them to be obedient and observe the rules and norms. Their concept of a relationship and marriage is sculpted out of their individual control. Lady Bracknell has possessed a wealth rooted in her family; indeed, her husband Lord Bracknell's wealth was the reason why she married him. She instructs the younger characters on marrying people who own the equal socio-economic conditions as they do, or who are superior to them. The reason for this is certain: financial comfort, and most importantly, social status. First, she strives to prevent her daughter from marrying a man with poor financial conditions; then, she disclaims Algernon and Cecily's union upon hearing. For the latter, she changes her mind fast and expresses her deep support for their marriage as soon as she learns the riches Cecily's father owns. Lady Bracknell's efforts to maintain a life surrounded with comfort and wealth may appear sympathetic in many aspects, as she seems to look after the rights of her beloved ones and herself at first sight. However, from a wider perspective, supporting the marriages for attainment of money and status is ludicrous and

strikes the eye as a very shallow approach. The belief that proper gender identities are required to involve in marriages show how surface gender beliefs are as well.

From the first act of the play, Wilde immerses serious questions in a trivial frame, while keeping the dramatic structure. In this respect, Eric Bentley notes, "Wilde attaches a serious and satirical allusion to every remark" (2010, p. 175). Lane's confession on Algernon's sentences, "I didn't think it polite to listen, sir" (I p. 4) establishes the initial step of humors which mock the class divisions, a subject Wilde will present parallel to the gender traits throughout the play. Algernon's "As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life" (I p. 4) statement serves well to poke fun at the struggle between two sides of an argument in the Victorian period; to say, reality and thought. Lane's opinions contribute to a series of social values criticism, as he accepts to have enjoyed some champagne at the last dinner, challenging the established master-servant relationship. Most importantly, he does not hesitate to express, "I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand" (I p. 4), getting the audience to ask questions about matrimony, family unit, and the alleged position of these two in life. Algernon recognizes that Lane's viewpoint on matrimony is rather slack. Referring to Lane, he mockingly protests: "If the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility" (I p. 6). On the one hand, Algernon queries the "holiness" of marriage; on the other, he lets the position of classes shift in terms of their constructed responsibilities. These duty shifts in the play remain an object of attention as the scenes follow. Together with the emphasis on class discriminations commonly made in the late Victorian society, the necessity of rebuilding an understanding on marriage, gender roles, or ideologies for life, are shed light upon. They are not merely themes which interrupt or sometimes assist the main flow of events; rather, they make the basis of the plot. Characters, either main or secondary, state their ideas via their dialogues, which result in a great deal of humorous and serious effects. Namely, their actions come in the second place.

Similar to Wilde's earlier characters in the previous plays, characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* express criticism about "modern" way of living. Marriage being under the biggest attack, many products of society are shed light on deeper. Algernon, for example, comments on marriage: "... in married life three is company and two is none" (I p. 17). Similar to Lane's speech at the beginning of the play, Miss Prism refers to the corrupting impact of marriage in the speech she delivers: "No married man is ever attractive, except to his wife" (I p. 54). Miss Prism tries to persuade Dr. Chasuble to marry her. This is another incident where Wilde exchanges gender roles, woman being the follower, and man, the followed. Also, the archetype of the celibate woman who is believed by the men to be attractive above any other woman is routed as Miss Prism is after Dr. Chasuble to flirt with him. Chasuble reminds that the marriage in which there is wife's antipathy for and dissatisfaction with her husband abounds with sadness. These feelings may drag the wife to infidelity at the end. Dr. Chasuble's somehow pessimistic reply when he says, "And often, I've been told, not even to her" (I p. 54) is also ironic since his duty, priesthood, necessitates that he advocate the marriage institution by referring to a number of religious aspects. Miss Prism mocks the married men by stating they lose their charm to marriage. Normally, men are expected to be attractive to their wives, as well as wives are expected to. However, it is doubtful they are attractive even to their wives. Hence, marriage only kills the passion a person has for another. Cecily also feels sure that the strictly house-bound nature of marriage changes a man in bad ways: "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive" (II p. 75). A man's attraction is equated with his distance from the household tasks, a mockery of the way through which a man constructs his gender identity. However, Cecily's desire as a wife to her future husband is about to change. Unless a man is molded into a domestic shape, he might become reckless, even a dandy in time, and his manners would certainly charm the rest of the women around him. Marriage makes a man what he is socially presumed to be. Married women's manners and attitudes are a topic of concern; as Algernon investigates, "the amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing

one's clean linen in public" (I p. 16). Algernon finishes the statement with a shift in meaning, such as "washing one's dirty linen in public". As far as he sees, a marriage can be a merry one only if it is a secret affair. Here, Wilde switches the emphasis put on the moral and the immoral, implying that only activities labelled as "bad" gain favor in public space. He has already made his mind on how to get into relationship with a woman: "the only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else, if she is plain" (I p. 35). On the other side of the coin, he had previously alleged that women resemble their mothers as they get older; blood will tell. This is a "tragic" advancement for them, he states. But none of the men does, and this is tragic of them. Indeed, whether adopting a parent's behaviors is a good thing or not cannot be understood from these statements. Again, Wilde removes the significance of taking after gender identities from the parents.

In life, as long as one carries out one's responsibilities, that person's actions will surely yield fruit. Such a perspective to life was dominant in the Victorian culture, and W.S. Gilbert mocks this approach of thought in the comic opera, *Ruddigore* (cited in Rowell, 1982): "For duty, duty must be done, The rule applies to every one, And painful though that duty be, To shirk the task were fiddle-de-dee!" Wilde produces a similarly humorous-but-critical atmosphere about the subject of "less significance but still earnestness". The events in the play enables Wilde to highlight the hypocritical bonds within the Victorian type of coupling activities through the courtships of Algernon and Cecily, Jack and Gwendolen, and Miss Prism and Chasuble. Wilde introduces their courtships as insignificant, which is normally respected and protected due to the gender traits expected by the Victorian people. The main confusion presented within the plot can be Lady Bracknell's rejection of her daughter's marriage with Jack. She assumes that Jack does not have dignity or status; hence, good reputation. His feelings for her daughter, namely love and devotion, is never a criteria for selection. Material riches, not personality traits, define a man's social position, and determine whether he is ready to marry or not. In the first act, she keeps him under inquiry in order to explore all details about him. He becomes successful mostly, except in one topic; he smokes. Though she looks at him as if she heard an unacceptable trait at first, Wilde's satire of such seriousness is

obvious when she expresses her satisfaction with his smoking habit. His age being twenty-nine is well appreciated by her as she comments, "a very good age to be married at" (I p. 28). More, he does not allege he is a knowledgeable man, and she likes this situation: "I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone" (I p. 29). As a female authority, she appreciates his inferior position, which is a mockery of the expectancy of a man being superior to his woman in terms of education. His biggest advantage is having a considerable amount of income from his assets; he owns some possessions. Surely, "that is satisfactory" (I p. 29). He can be dumb, as long as he has a big wallet it's ok. He does not fiercely support any political sides. However, when a "minor matter" occurs, in Lady Bracknell's words, he cannot pass. After learning he has lost both of his parents, she exclaims: "Both? . . . That seems like carelessness" (I p. 30). What Wilde tries to achieve with these humorous inversions is that the ways society defines a man does not constitute what he is, but the way he feels himself to be does. She means that he is of obscure origins, no status, no respectable family, so not a good match for her daughter. Wilde declares his ideas on this matter quite openly in *De Profundis*, ". . . what is said of a man is nothing. The point is, who says it" (1905, p. 120). Lady Bracknell stands out as a mother figure who welcomes a husband-to-be for her daughter as long as he has possessions, despite his ignorance, or unemployment. The "offending" part of this is not the fact that she holds these priorities in her search, but the courageousness with which she explicitly utters them. Most of the mothers in the Victorian society would desire their daughter to make a family with a young and rich prospective husband, but not too many of them could express this as openly as Lady Bracknell did, as obvious from her question, "what is your income?" (I p. 29). Not her material approach, but her candidness comprises deconstruction at this point. Likewise, it is not the causes of rejection but the wording she uses at the moment of opposing Jack as her daughter's husband which feels astonishing: "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel" (I p. 33). Through this ridiculousness and intended deconstruction of meanings, Wilde is able to reveal the void basis of Victorian accountability on

gender divisions. Birth and financial status are the initial determinants of being a marriageable man. Lady Bracknell totally disregards Jack's possible love to her daughter, or her daughter's to Jack. Indeed, love is irrelevant, material concerns matter. Similar to the view of Lord Caversham in *An Ideal Husband*, a relationship, followed by a marriage, is a financial agreement made within strict borders. That is why it has to be ensured by the solemn parent, not by the insignificant child. Wilde underlines the hypocrisy behind the respected Victorian courtships one more time in Lady Bracknell's inquiry scene related to Cecily's competences, a scene similar to her questioning of Jack in Act I. When she hears that Cecily has "a hundred and thirty thousand pounds", and it is all "in the Funds", she immediately starts seeing her as a charming girl. An explanation follows: "Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time" (III p. 100). Money is so significant for Lady Bracknell that her own marriage would not have been without taking it to the center. She states: "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way" (III p. 106). It would be expected of her to provide her daughter's and nephew's welfare. Although she refutes the idea that she is in favor of marriages in the form of financial contracts, her real stance is apparent. In the original four-act version of the play, Lady Brancaster states her thought to Algernon: "It would be an act of criminal folly to allow a girl so richly endowed as Miss Cardew to pass entirely out of our family", an idea which is the brief interpretation of her perception of matrimony.

Apart from the suffocating restrictions of the society, nineteenth century is also eminent for various writers who presented their observations with an ironic and witty language in their works, but what makes Wilde distinctive is his unrehearsed awareness of the depths of the social body, and his intricate and mocking analyses, such as in the following dialogue between Algernon and Jack:

Algernon: If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

Jack: ". . . The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted". (I p. 8)

This stands out as an examination of the profligate condition in which the late nineteenth century marriages had survived. While Algernon holds a surface

attitude towards the value of marriage, Jack approaches him in a solemn manner. Algernon's instant and witty sentence on its own can be noted as an epigram full of irony. His bold assertion is to retain his sensational delights of his life as a single when he gets married. Algernon is merely a representative of the people who underestimate the idea of marriage in the late Victorian society. Furthermore, Jack clearly embodies the common act of infidelity committed because of the heavy effects of the pretended gender roles. Jack deliberately misinterprets Algernon's words and mentions that if one constantly disregards his/her spouse and commits adultery, the "downtrodden" spouse may file a lawsuit against one. The spouse may have found the required proof to divorce the other, and benefit from the opportunity given by The Divorce Law.

Mostly in marriages, gender imbalances under social influences come onto surface. Wilde underlines these ruptures with his witty selection of words. All of his social plays carry traces of this wit in their ways of criticizing marriage institution. Using a deliberately frivolous tone, he tends to produce unexpected and sudden wit. He mocks the characters' behaviors and get them uttering absurd words, such as the conversation where Lady Bracknell asks Jack if he smokes (I p. 28):

Lady Bracknell: . . . I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is.

She implies that he can prove his manliness on the condition that he is a smoker, which is one of the most humorous gender expectancies of the society.

Though many courtships end up with "happiness" in literary works, Wilde assumes a courtship to be a failure once the couple gets married at the end. Marriage as a traditional means of announcing happiness among the public does not ensure happiness in Wilde's social plays. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for instance, he trifles the common expectation of happily-ever-after finals of "three volume novels". Even Cecily, considered to be a silent and obedient female figure at first glance, says, "I don't like novels that end

happily. They depress me so much” (II p. 45). As a woman, she was supposed to anticipate the chivalric love to win at the end, but she does not show up in a traditional fashion. Her governess does not fail to answer her idea, stating that in the novel, “the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (II p. 46).

The Importance of Being Earnest is filled with many implicit statements about the theme of adultery. This theme gains significance in the deconstruction of gender roles as it pulls down the moral, virtuous concept of manhood. Algernon’s bringing forth a fictional man called Ernest for the aim of running away from his responsibilities in the social world makes it a topic for him and Jack to talk about adultery. Algernon comments: “A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it”, reminding his desire to maintain his Bunburying even after marriage; however, Jack disagrees: “That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl. . . I certainly won’t want to know Bunbury”, and Algernon replies, “Then your wife will. . . In married life three is company and two is none”. Jack agrees at last: “That . . . is the theory that the corrupt French drama has been propounding for the last fifty years”, which is supported by Algernon as well: “Yes; and the happy English home has proved in half the time” (I p. 17). Neither men nor women are capable of performing their roles in given ways forever. Gender roles are both limited and limiting; they restrict freedom.

Algernon refers to infidelity as he refers to the third person to be included in the marriage as the “company”. Bunbury in this respect can refer to both the person who is involved in a relationship with a third person and an imaginary character whom this person utilizes in order to find excuses to fulfill his affairs. Jack may claim that when he gets married, he will remain loyal to his spouse and stay far from Bunburying; however, Algernon suggests that one of the parties will inevitably betray the other. Jack’s moral attitude to make an excuse for the adultery seen in England is not responded by Algernon as he wishes, because Algernon informs him on the fact that infidelity originates in “happy” households, which are dignified at the same time. Reference to the theme of infidelity is recognizable in the heavy burst against women who are believed to have improper actions. Algernon rejects joining Lady Bracknell’s evening party

and tells it to Jack. The reason of his reluctance is, he says, is that “she will place [him] next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. . . . and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase . . . Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying (I p. 16)”. Indeed, Wilde transposes the construct of “married women seeing other men” with this example. He makes a depiction of this complicated issue with a tone of mockery. The term “Bunburying” as the finisher of this talk adds an ironic twist as the word will be used in order to refer to infidelity later on. Married couples make a show of their love, which has actually been gone. They pretend that they still love each other. Algernon points to this hypocrisy.

Though not as much as the twenty-first century, number of divorces in the late Victorian period was increasing considerably, and Wilde thought that the bonds set up via marriages were never robust. Lane expresses his ignorance on the marriage issue, stating that he has married only once. The bonds supposed to keep him connected with his spouse are not strong enough and he does not regard himself to lead a family any more. Wilde’s reference to the lower class as lacking the ability to be morally leading figures in the society is in fact a sarcasm which issues the so called moral accountability of the middle class when it comes to marriage and their responsibility of standing out as proper gender role models for the lower class people.

Jack and Algernon’s approach to marriage in *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveals that men attribute marrying to exhaustion, and women to curiosity, both of which end up with disappointment. Especially Algernon’s words make it clear that he desires to marry mostly due to the tiredness he feels as a bachelor man. Gwendolyn and Cecily are no different from these men, as they wish to marry in order to take a step into a new life. Pestka interprets Gwendolyn’s affection for Jack as “mere self-admiration combined with the desire for novel experiences” (1989). This becomes obvious when Gwendolyn reproves Jack because he does not fulfill the procedure he is supposed to while proposing marriage. Procedures matter much more than the act of marrying. Besides, both Cecily and she link their attraction to the two men on the condition of their being re-named. Cecily’s imagining herself as a heroine in a romance leads to

the idea of courtship with a false character, Ernest. Algernon does not correspond with her; hence, she makes up a set of writings; she creates remembrances which Algernon and she fictitiously exchange, writes about an argument between lovers, comments on an engagement which is first broken, then remade. Just like the imaginary engagement she approaches in an unserious way, the real engagement is a trivial apparatus for her. Her words, "Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming" (II p. 70) contain no sorrow. This is another moment when Wilde uses "irony of comparison" by juxtaposing two discrepant states. In this way, what is known as significant is reduced to an insignificant matter one more time. These women are worth considering in terms of their superior attitudes as well; Gwendolyn's wit outweighs Jack's, and Cecily cuts down Algernon's impact via making an alternative while Cecily immediately throws Algernon off guard by creating a realism alternative to his existence.

Jack was raised by upper class people, but since he is an orphan, he might not have been born into a family of the same sort. As a baby, he was left to a train station in a bag, and this event suffices to have Lady Bracknell to doubt his roots. Besides, "Jack" is not a really respectable name, so she does not want to let her daughter marry him until she acknowledges his wealth. Also, she feels pretty assured that his house takes place on the least stylish section of his street even though it is in an exclusive part of London. Lady Bracknell herself does not need wealth or status, as she already has them due to her family. However, it is not possible for her to have her daughter marry to a random man and her reputation, stained. On the other hand, her covetousness defeats her upon learning Cecily's huge wealth. Her nephew's wedlock with such a girl would bring profit to the family in all aspects. This becomes obvious when Lady Bracknell confirms Jack's marriage with Cecily only when she finds out Cecily's father possessed three estates, even though Jack has been trying to tell her about the good family positioning Cecily had, as well as Miss Cardew's "birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation and the measles; both the German and the English variety" (III p. 100), for a while. She is taken over by the possessions, so she does not get interested in the naming. Not the background but "three addresses always inspire confidence..." (III p.

98). Three addresses are reference to the number of estates inherited. Jack's house in London had been a matter of question, but Cecily is not queried on her houses because their abundance grants them valuable enough.

The hypocritical viewpoints of the upper class reach a higher level via Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For Wilde, as long as people get united for the sake of money, it is not possible, and not necessary, to speak of feelings, sensations, or pure love. At first, Lady Bracknell is disdainful of Cecily and Jack as one of them lacks birth, and the other, wealth. In fact, her nephew has heavy debt, and Lady Bracknell herself did not possess "fortune of any kind" by the time he got married with Lord Bracknell (III p. 102). She contradicts herself because she defends her marriage by stating her objection to "mercenary marriages". She is aware that her nephew, Algernon is totally penniless and wants to make Cecily sure that she is about to get united with a poor man. Another point here is, Algernon's instant love for Cecily may have blazed upon hearing about her riches. He condemns the type of activities his aunt support; paradoxically, his marriage is made under the influence of financial circumstances, just like his aunt's was in the past. Lady Bracknell is exactly acquainted with the rules of the marriage "industry". As a young girl, she arranged a marriage well enough with the support of her mother. As she attained a comfortable position in the society, in terms of both wealth and status, she now strives to provide a similar comfort to her daughter. Surely, one must bear in mind that Wilde "laughs at arranged marriages and all the prudential considerations entailed by them" (Ellmann, 1982). She trivially keeps a list of the potential candidates for her daughter to marry, and the items in the list unsurprisingly matches with the ones on the list of a friend of hers. These two women together circle the most suitable ones, not to mention that the men emphasized are rich, and they come from eligible backgrounds. As Jack visits the Bracknells for expressing his intention to marry Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell gives a negative reaction, saying that his name is not on the list. Following this greeting, she starts interviewing him in the same way she probably did in case of the previous candidates. Wilde criticizes Lady Bracknell, and the society's financial regard of marriage. He does not hold a harsh view against the

marriages of the two young couples. However, in order to satisfy their needs of happiness, they follow ways which are not really convenient for social order.

Clearly, the shift Lady Bracknell makes in her opinions about consenting these two marriages is not a real shift. The final scene is decorated with a sight of finance-based marriages' failure. However, it is kept there pretty well. As a member of the upper class society, Lady Bracknell knows how to keep track of the whole society. She is totally knowledgeable about the tactics of finding correct candidates for her daughter. She knows how to utilize the people around her in order to reach her goals as well, since she has to act consciously if she holds higher aims. She embraces all the qualities the late Victorian society treats with honor. Along with Wilde's effective epigrams, the late Victorian audience would feel a sympathy towards his portrayal of such a conventional character, woman, and mother as Lady Bracknell. Her family fame, riches, and class are all intact. Her effect is plain when she ensures she could have both Cecily as an orphan and Jack as a boy with anonymous roots received acceptance within the society. Throughout his mockeries and satire, Wilde does not portray Lady Bracknell as a weak character, though. He presents her as a real spokesmodel of the constructed gender traits, with all her vehemence and stiffness.

One of the constructs Wilde undermines with respect to gender identities is that even a coupling with love does not have a favorable side. Most of Wilde's young female characters display an unwilling attitude to marry with pure love; they even talk of love as a word only because they find the pronunciation of the word nice. The reason Gwendolyn and Cecily seek marriage is absurd. They believe in ideals they totally make up in their minds, these ideas are instilled in them socially and culturally. Throughout the play, Wilde shows them holding unrealistic expectations regarding their notion of how an "ideal" husband should be. For example, Gwendolyn is open in her statement of expectancy: "We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest" (I p. 23). Gwendolyn's sentences leave a comical impression on the audience due to Wilde's employment of "the ironic device of

deflation by comparison; the serious issue is equated with the trivial one, undercutting the significance of the former” (Pestka, 1989, p. 178). Matching with an ideal husband for sharing a common life is put side to side with the frivolous effort to match with somebody called Ernest. As Pestka summarizes, Wilde’s plays in words clearly show that “the Philistine values are deflated... ideals in general become mere labels; in other words, the investment of moral value in accidental objects chosen arbitrarily by putting appropriate names on them”. Both striving to find a man called Ernest to marry and the trial itself in terms of finding someone “ideal” to marry are incomparably trivial. While Lady Bracknell seeks a husband who will assure a financial status for Gwendolyn, Gwendolyn chases after an imaginary, ideal husband, both of which reveal the hypocrite meanings loaded on women’s gender identity.

4.2 “Underrated women” as an Ideological Product

A salient reason for the guile in marriages in the late Victorian society is recognized within the misrepresentations and hypocrite encryptions attached to the Victorian women. Women were instructed to conceal their desires, wishes, feelings, physical changes – their enlarging bellies due to pregnancy, for example -, and to hide their bodies, especially in public places. While their parents have tended to keep them far from tempting others from very early ages, it has become inevitable for women to grow up in an environment surrounded with pressure and deception. Also, their family teaches to be unemotional because cold reason is more important than heart. Their family knows love does not get them anywhere but money. Wilde uncloaks the barren perception on women and the education they are supposed to take with the metaphor of “Gwendolen’s glasses” (II p. 75). Gwendolen has to watch Cecily through a pair of glasses as she talks, because she says cannot see her clearly with naked eye as for the type of education she acquired from her mother. Besides, Cecily says: “I don’t quite like women who are interested in philanthropic work. I think it is so forward of them” (II p. 73). They are obliged to be passive ornaments, and men’s job is to regulate philanthropic issues. However, the sexual duality under the terms “women” and “men” was irretrievably troubled in the nineteenth century. The ideological power structure was being replaced with an alternative

model which involved multiple values. The female figure, who was never supposed to be taken by sensual influences, an angelic creature, "a purer race . . . destined to inspire in the rest of the human race the sentiments of all which is noble, generous and devoted" (de Saussure, 1844, p. 44), was merely the production of the values of middle class women and men beneath which lied a number of political plans.

Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell's daughter, might be perceived as a stereotypical Victorian woman at first sight. Her mother brought her up in the city, and she has turned into a "sophisticated, fashionable woman of the town" (Eltis, 1996, p. 182). Assuredly, she has been protected from the perils of the world by her mother at all times, and still, her mother is persistently there to exercise authority over her life. It is because of the traditional and overprotective style of nurturing that she believes herself to be living in "an age of ideals" and hence, defends the importance of self-development. In the Victorian period, it was common to "educate" the girls of the upper class society at home while they were growing, with the tutorship of educators coming to houses. As a real Victorian girl, Gwendolen shows loyalty to her mother in all respects. Lady Bracknell aims to prefer a marriage for her daughter's benefit without any hesitation, and gladly stands by her in case any troubles occur during the process. She declines Gwendolen's desire to marry Jack, though she tended to confirm it when she first heard the news. In return, however, Gwendolen reacts, which implies her unconventional side. Although Gwendolyn is portrayed as a traditional woman at the beginning, the way she behaves to her mother proves the opposite later. She may have been grown up within limitations and prohibitions; however, she is strong enough to overcome the impact of traditional gender perceptions and stand up against her mother. Another rebellious act she makes is to send her kisses to Jack when her mother turns back, a behavior showing the triviality she attributes to her mother's ideas. In addition, despite the ban Lady Bracknell brings on her marriage with Jack, she looks at Jack and tells him that although her mother may prevent their marriage, and though she may get married to some other person- even people, marry more than once- , these will not change her devotion to Jack forever. There is a point to recognize here: Gwendolen exhibits attitudes similar to her mother while

communicating with Jack. Lady Bracknell generally perceives and talks of men as ineffectual and helpless beings, merely suitable for manipulation. When Gwendolyn talks to Jack, her guidance and directing Jack the way she desires is noteworthy. She instructs him how to love, and what it is, even pushes him to propose marriage to her. In a typical way of proposing, a woman hears the proposal and if she wants to, gives a negative reply even though it would not alter the consequence, i.e. the wish of her family. In the case of Gwendolyn and Jack, however, Gwendolyn seems to be madly eager to accept his proposal even before he speaks out. As he has not asked the expected question yet, she is curious to find out: "Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?" (I p. 25). The moment when she is exposed to the truth about Jack's real identity, which is way far from "earnest" ness, her first reaction is frustration and sadness, but she continues the discussion with the aim to make him face his own lies. Meanwhile, she does not hesitate to bear down on him: "Mr Worthing, what explanation can you offer me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?" (III p. 93). It can be understood from her approach to Jack that Gwendolyn is the leading side in their relationship and she manages his reactions. Also, with reference to the previous example, Gwendolyn's stern comments about how decisive and devoted she is in her relationship with Jack, despite all the difficulties and impossibilities she might face, are implications of a "combination of actual female virtue with healthy appetites and urges" (Eltis, 1996, p. 187). Needless to say, such an attitude was not typical of the late Victorian women.

Besides Gwendolyn, Cecily is quite unconventional while leading a love relationship with Algernon since she dominates the relationship frequently. She had fallen in love with Algernon even without meeting him in person because she had been influenced by the comments Jack made about him; he had mentioned how wicked he had been. By the time they first get to know each other, she feels sure of her opinions about him. As he butters her up with various compliments, her first reaction is embarrassment. However, it does not last too long for her to take the law in her hands and check him up. She even asks him to pronounce the flattering words aloud in order for her to note them in

her notebook. She shows a great degree of sensitivity towards the words he selects during that time. He tells her: “I have dared to love you, wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly” (II p. 67); but she pauses him and take his attention to his word selection: “I don’t think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn’t seem to make much sense, does it?” (II p. 67). The power and control she holds over their dialogue is visible. In addition to her authority in the relationship, she falsely utters while talking to Algernon that Jack and she have been engaged for a long while. She is so eager to manage her own love life that she buys a ring for herself and sends her own letters to herself on behalf of Algernon. More, she calls Algernon a “boy” from time to time, proving her feeling of supremacy over Algernon. Similar to the ways Gwendolyn follows, Cecily shows Algernon a patronizing attitude. She sustains her power over him and strengthens it by preparing for an engagement by herself. Cecily hears in the final scene that she is not allowed to marry before she is thirty-five. Upon hearing this, Algernon does not refuse to wait for the day to come. However, Cecily seems not to show any patience for that, as she dislikes waiting for a person even for five minutes (III p. 105). As her words reveal, Cecily “rejects the role of eternally faithful maiden who waits patiently to be united with her beloved” (Eltis, 1996, p. 187). This attitude of her remains too far from the traditional ways of behavior imposed upon the women of the century. It can be realized here that Wilde makes a purposeful inversion; the alleged male domination not only in society but also in dialogues and relationship balance is replaced by the female control through the use of a humorous language. The reason why women have long pursued “bad” men, Algernon states, is that they intrinsically want to correct them. Algernon thinks he is one of those men, so he wants Cecily to change him into good as he is anxious about not being as good as the society necessitates: “That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission” (II p. 51). Cecily’s answer creates sarcasm, when she says she cannot because she does not have time in the afternoon of that day; hence, he should make his own reform. Cecily even suggests that he should eat a nice meal before starting his reform activity. This scene, where Wilde shows that a woman can alter a man’s life only in one afternoon and the man can enjoy a satisfying meal before starting his own modification, abounds mockery. Just as in *Lady Windermere’s*

Fan, Wilde elaborates on the temporariness of many gender habits established and maintained by society and culture. The concept of a man's reform, for Wilde, is an object for derision. The thing needed is not the men reforming themselves, but the social constructs being reevaluated and getting unstandardized. The stubbornness Gwendolen and Cecily show while insisting on potential marriages made with the men named "Ernest", even though these men prove to act in the opposite direction of earnestness, should be regarded as Wilde's impression of the Victorian culture, where people of all sexes were being stereotyped in multiple ways. Cecily does not fail to catch up with Gwendolen in terms of her ambitious pursuit for the Ernest husband.

In the play, Lady Bracknell can be seen as an advocate of Victorian traditions and beliefs at first sight due to her old age and rigid image. However, she displays a number of alternative traits. She aims to monitor her daughter's preferences in all respects. Obviously, Jack is not a suitable candidate to marry her daughter, so she rejects their union. She only attributes value on people's social status, and in connection with that, wealth. These factors prevent her from selecting Jack for her daughter. Such manners stem from the conventional side of the character, but her characterization is not merely limited to that. In Act I, she is after questioning Jack on whether he is a "correct" man to unite with her daughter. As soon as she finds out that Jack is a smoking man, she expresses her satisfaction because for her, "a man should have an occupation of some kind" (I p. 28). Furthermore, upon hearing that Jack speaks of himself as a man knowing nothing, her reply shows her satisfaction. In both situations, the way she comments on Jack's answers is not really anticipated, compared to her traditional Victorian base (Eltis, 1996, p. 181). Lady Bracknell's emphasis on the precedence of a male portrayal weaker than usually narrated is apparent in her own marriage as well. In her eyes, her husband is a baby who needs constant care and protection.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in a similar manner to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde tries to subvert the traditional gender perceptions by introducing women that dominate their husbands. Lady Bracknell displays a managerial attitude in a society formed by patriarchal power. Lord Bracknell is hardly ever referred to throughout the play; even when done, he is referred to with sarcasm.

Lady Bracknell confesses that she will not tell the truth to her husband, since she has never been honest to him on any occasion. She makes a number of jokes on Lord Bracknell and his passiveness. Lord Bracknell proves to be ineffective in the process of choosing a suitable suitor for his daughter; besides, he does not participate in her raising process. To illustrate, Lady Bracknell informs Jack that the parents are responsible of selecting the best candidate-to-marry; however, she is the one who keeps the list of the candidates with her. Moreover, she holds herself accountable for all the support and directing Algernon is to receive; again, Lord Bracknell is invisible during these processes.

Lord Bracknell's depiction as a subservient male character is intentional as Wilde plays with the meanings "active" and "passive", or "strong" and "weak", which were rather predetermined and stable within the Victorian representations. Lord Bracknell does not take place as a physical character in the act, and is merely mentioned in words. He does not own a voice, or a stance, of his own in this respect. Both Lady Bracknell and his daughter, Gwendolyn evoke his name as if they are talking of a child, even someone stupid at times. Also, Lady Bracknell complains about Algernon's non-presence on that day, because the fact that he is absent will cause her husband to have dinner together with them upstairs, which is an implication of his exclusion from the family. He has his usual meals with the housekeepers downstairs. When Gwendolyn has her say, she puts forth her thought which implies that father is "entirely unknown" (II p. 75) by people except the family members, asserting this is "quite as it should be" (II p. 75), because the household is always "the proper sphere for the man" (II p. 75). This assertion is a sharp inversion of the gendered features of the two sexes. Lady Bracknell displays another insubordination against the baptism of Jack and Algernon and she expresses how dissatisfied her husband would be upon learning that, as he would regard it as a waste of money and time. Here, Lady Bracknell considers Lord Bracknell as the head of morals in their house, a trait typically attributed to women in the family union. It is also obvious from Lady Bracknell's words that she is the one responsible for practical issues with respect to society and communication, finding an appropriate husband for her daughter. All her behaviors contribute to the inversion of the deep-seated gender roles. Wilde's women are not passivated,

suppressed, or vulnerable, as in the case of the archetypes of Victorian culture. Instead, they are assertive, and have self-awareness. On the contrary, men are prone to external influences, unable to show strength over “their” women at the same time.

The fact that Lord Bracknell is not a loud figure during all these events is probably not a result of his own preference. Lady Bracknell overshadows him with her overconfident actions. Lady Bracknell displays her finance-based intentions as if they are for her daughter’s benefit. She might be recognized to be after her own financial benefits as well, especially when she married to Lord Bracknell for his riches. She eventually achieves her goals with her daughter’s marriage. Another point related to Lady Bracknell is that even though Wilde initially presents her as a sort of antagonist who frustrates the will of the young couples, she does not end up in a miserable or defeated condition in the end of the play. On the contrary, she achieves her expectations in terms of both her daughter’s and her nephew’s marriages and gains in relation to those marriages. Her aims appear to match the ones of the youngsters, their starting points being dissimilar, though. The youngsters look glad to have married as they got united for the sake of “love”; hence, they disregard Lady Bracknell’s initial dictations on the necessity of mercenary marriages. Wilde may have issued such unexpected endings compared to Lady Bracknell’s materialistic aims due to the fact that as a social construct, Lady Bracknell and her reflection of the social approach to marriages are there to be scrutinized.

Another female character in the play, Miss Prism, Cecily’s governess is recognized as a pure and orderly Puritan figure at first sight. As the play proceeds, she proves to be a woman less traditional. Since she works as a governess, she is supposed to demonstrate ethical and chaste attitudes. She feels the responsibility to change Cecily’s ideas from bad to good when she claims Jack being sombre. Miss Prism reminds her that Jack is a respectable man. However, she forgets about her “responsibility” once and acts carelessly while ignoring the duty of reminding Cecily. This contradicts with her usual portrayal as a Puritan. On the one hand, she promotes herself as an advocate of correct gender behaviors; on the other, she displays contradictory actions. Cecile, in the meantime, continuously approaches Miss Prism’s opinions with a questioning

attitude, and this reminds the audience of the concept of morality Wilde aims to investigate. More, Cecily is unwilling to learn German despite Miss Prism's efforts, and desires Jack's brother, who is now known as immoral, to drop into their house for a meeting. These two incidents strengthen the image where Cecily does not recognize her governess's authority and revolts against a power unit that tries to educate her.

Miss Prism is an agent in *The Importance of Being Earnest* since she represents a point through which Wilde shifts secrets into realities. As her name shows, Miss Prism is a regular and prim character. Dr. Chasuble describes her as "the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability" (III p. 107). She declares her moral attitude when she states, "as a man sows, so shall he reap" (II p. 44). It is the moment when Lady Bracknell appears on the stage in Act III that we are faced with a very unusual side of Miss Prism, however. She behaves far less alert in fulfilling her responsibilities than she has been observed up to that point. She expresses with her own words:

"The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, . . . I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag". (III p. 109)

Hence, in spite of the fact that she had been posing as a morally perfect, upright woman with several responsibilities, she turns out to display flaws and fecklessness just like Algernon and Jack did. Similar to Jack and Algernon's condition, the revelation of Miss Prism's secret only leads to a comical final setting. Jack learns that she is actually his mother, and attempts to hug her. Wilde clearly depreciates the fact that Miss Prism is an old maid in this scene. Wilde's comical style of reversal is deliberate as he devaluates a specific social matter, turning it into an unimportant subject to talk of. One of the essential questions in social plays, the question of a guilty man's or woman's accountability to the public, is handled by Wilde in a humorous manner. In the version including four acts, Gribbsby, a prosecuting officer, comes in Jack's house for detaining the "Ernest" Worthing due to his inability to pay for the

food he enjoys at the Savoy. At that moment, Algernon is the one pretending to be “Ernest” since he is trying to fully conquer Cecily’s heart, so he becomes Gribbsy’s target. Ironically, the food to be paid are Jack’s expenditures, not Algernon’s. At all points, Algernon has to pay the price of succumbing to his appetite, like all the other culpable characters in the social plays. He is constantly seen eating muffins. The food cost invoiced is not a low one, but from his point of view, food is the object of desire, rather than power, or emotions. In addition to this, Algernon meets the news that he was sentenced to prison at Holloway humorously as a dandy would. Upon this conversation topic, Gribbsy gives a depiction of prison setting in a superficially pretentious manner. The details establish a worrisome image, which Wilde must have fictionalized predicting his Holloway imprisonment following the first London staging of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He was kept in prison for the “sensual” excesses he led while in the West End. He, however, trivializes the matters of “utmost importance” in this play, such as the sinner and sin, the meanings attached to gender stereotypes. Satirizing the act of imprisonment by means of reducing the cause to merely eating too much is a product of wit, which stands for his self-parody considering the conditions in which he had been judged.

The chain of hypocrite double standards is a gate to bear children outside marriage, a societal matter of discussion which apparently leads to different consequences for women and men. *The Importance of Being Earnest* mocks this double standardization in a dramatic manner. “[The play expresses] Wilde’s ideology of legitimate family relationships, of love in kinship but also the need for links of definition - for both fallen woman and a lost child...” (Johnson, 1984, p. 209). Jack assumes that Miss Prism is his mother, but there exists a confusion: she rejects having been married, and this leads to Jack’s belief that he was born outside marriage: “Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But, after all, who has a right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out the act of folly? Why should there be one law for men and another for women? Mother, I forgive you” (III p. 112). Following this reply, he tries to hug Miss Prism, who has already been afraid of being rejected. Jack’s attempt is not a regular one; indeed, he looks absurd enough.

Even though Jack's words above are dramatic, the situation they are uttered in blurs the seriousness. Wilde reflects his perspective here by not merely satirizing a scene typical of the Victorian gender attitudes; there exists scenes similar to this in *Lady Windermere's Fan* as well and these are overall "perfectly ironic version of the old familiar ideology, the fallen woman and lost child" (Johnson, 1984, p. 210). The lost child, Jack, was put into a luggage and left at the train station. The fallen woman can be associated with Miss Prism, a close-minded maid. The play brings up the question of Jack's family roots, as his degree of legitimacy shows whether he is a suitable candidate for marriage or not. At the end of the play, familial connections are restored as the lost child is not lost any more, being found by the symbol of "motherhood", Lady Bracknell. Despite her previous reactions, she embraces Jack as her nephew at the end. Indeed, this symbol of motherhood in the play is contradictory enough to confuse the traditionally accepted form of motherhood.

4.3 Women's Expectation of Ideal Men, Men's of Ideal Women

In the Victorian period, women carried one main duty in society: getting married and involving in their husband's lives as supporters. If they belonged to a mid-class family or lower, they had to acquire all the skills a housewife is supposed to have, so learning to cook, clean, even weaving was quite important. They were exempt from the household tasks on the condition that they were rich enough to hire housemaids. It was also a basic feature of the century that women were to learn any knowledge "inside" the household, as there was a society outside which was attributed to men, their management, and training. Women of the Victorian period were required to carry out purity and innocence as the basic component of their femininity. Else, they could not be proper candidates for wifhood. A woman would be left a maiden if she did not fit the society's notion of femininity. As it was inappropriate for them to participate in the world of manly practices, women led their developmental processes in their homes, getting ready for marriage life. This circle of expectations was not one-sided. Women held a number of expectations with respect to their potential husbands, just like men held for them. Men already had to take the society under control by proving their power on both institutional and individual terms;

besides, they were compelled to earn the dignity, respect, and appreciation on women's side before they could marry them. An embodiment of this societal fact is Gwendolen's acceptance that she gives importance to the ideal man in her mind more than anything else (I p. 23). As Jack's counterfeit name is Ernest, she has been drawn into the notion that he is the right, virtuous, and decent husband figure in whom she could confide. She owes her trust in Ernest to the name. She even imagines her fate as being sealed to him for the same reason; loving him is her destiny. An opposite scenario is unthinkable for her; she does not desire to think of a scenario in which his name is not Ernest. It is, and must be so.

Men were continually condemned to pressure as they always criticized each other's achievements. A man's single marital status was an obvious disadvantage because it highlighted his insufficiency; a man was missing without a family to maintain. Keeping a family going was definitely an indicator of the real achievement in men's world. As John Tosh asserts, "to form a household, to exercise authority over dependents, and to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and protecting them—these things set the seal on a man's gender identity" (1999); the responsibilities aforementioned obviously strengthens the traditional idea of social responsibilities divided between and the balance of economics shared by two genders. Having a family to survive all the difficult financial situations was one of the hardest tasks a man was supposed to fulfill. When he solved that out, he was labelled as successful, which earned him the respected position among the other men, and across the society. This also proved man's capacity to elevate the workforce. Women did not hold any chance other than having such men as their dream husbands. Taking this idealization of women regarding perfect spouses into account, we can say that in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily and Gwendolyn are filled up with dreams of flawless husbands and flawless marriages. They are totally obsessed with the name 'Earnest,' since the men whom they will marry could only be "earnest". They extend their obsession up to the point of not choosing a man to marry until his name is Earnest, as they suggest that a man with that name would technically exhibit the traits belonging to an earnest man, such as honor, good conduct or solemnity. Walter E. Houghton, the author of

The Victorian Frame of Mind, informs that a person can be called 'earnest' on the condition that s/he provides the qualities of being moral and intellectual. He says, "To be earnest intellectually is to have or to seek to have genuine beliefs about the most fundamental questions in life" (1957, p. 220). We can recognize that the Victorian male was expected to internalize the conditions of life he has been through without repeating the errors of his progenitors. They had to achieve all the information necessary for leading their lives in success and prosperity. A clearer definition of earnestness can be such: "To be earnest morally is to recognize that human existence is not a short interval between birth and death . . . but a spiritual pilgrimage from here to eternity in which he is called upon to struggle with all his power against the forces of evil . . ." (Houghton, 1957, p. 221). In order to be called "earnest", the person must prefer to maintain a life by keeping far from any offensive or harmful behavior; in other words, s/he should discriminate between right and wrong, and pick his/her stance. Such a preference, when the background of "morality" taken into account, inescapably brings about religious connotations of earnestness. Hence, God and spirituality must be the person's reference point during decision making, or merely living his/her daily life. S/he must preserve the purity at all times. Contradictorily, Wilde uses the name "Earnest" in an ironic way in the play. He presents two deceitful male characters, but dreamed of by two women as if the best husbands-to-be in the world. These characters assert that they powerfully cling to the Victorian norms and traditions; indeed, they strive to create a life outside those norms for themselves. So, they get smashed under the obligation they feel to meet the demands of women, and the society in general, instead of staying loyal to their true identities and desires. This pressure not only molds the behaviors of these men, but it also affects the perceptions Cecily and Gwendolyn have regarding men and manhood. They wait for the flawless husbands to come to them and possess them. They don't feel like seeing another way to acquire that perfect marriage, which is supposedly the ideal in the mind of a "typical" Victorian woman. Showing off as a married woman while other people are looking at her is Gwendolen's main intention (I p. 26). The fact that Cecily and Gwendolyn are waiting for the perfect husband is totally due to the Victorian culture which they were born into and grown up with; their ideals are getting into shape in accordance with that. For Alan Ackerman, however, ideals

involve serious dangers, and idealization of a name is no exception. “The false ideal[s] of our time’ are shown to be disastrous in nearly every one of Wilde’s plays. Ideals are dangerous things” (2008, p. 142). Even though not in physical terms, such idealizations will give psychological damage to not only the idealizing person but also the idealized, as the latter will probably strive to catch up with the expectations of his/her mate at all times in their relationship. In Act I, Jack explains the secret about his identity to Algernon. He has two names which he uses in different places; he is known as Jack in the country, and as Earnest in the city. He has told a lie to people, that his imaginary brother is called Earnest and lives in the city; so, he needs to visit him at any time necessary. In return, Algernon confesses that he has similarly made up an imaginary person with the name of Bunbury living in the country. He has announced his ill health condition, and his obligation to visit him often, in order to justify his frequent visits to the country. Thanks to these imaginary characters they created, these men find the chance to get away from the limitations of the Victorian society, and have fun during their time in isolation. They do not feel obliged to amuse the others around. They are concentrated on amusing merely themselves during the time they spend in their “comfort zone”. Due to having confessed their “other” identities to each other, Algernon and Jack prove that they have not been earnest at all from the beginning. This proves the exact opposite of the way Cecile and Gwendolyn regard manhood. These men do not succeed in matching with their “ideal” versions. Not only do they enliven false personal traits in their environment, but they also lie about where they are and what they do, which is another evidence of their remoteness from being perfect husbands. If a person is earnest, s/he supposedly does not trick others into imaginary characters and locations in order to draw away from the aspects of their lives which they do not prefer facing. Social and marital traditions of the Victorian life force them to construct secret gender identities. Meanwhile, they are obliged to think of a plan which will enable them to marry Cecily and Gwendolyn, because the probability of marriage with them will fall into danger if they are revealed to fall behind the women’s expectations. Gwendolyn, for instance, has already proclaimed that she would in no way love Jack unless his name was Earnest: “There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend

called Earnest, I knew I was destined to love you” (I p. 23). Jack must become her destiny because his name fulfills her demands. Russell Jackson argues in his article that “Gwendolyn announces, and proceeds to enunciate the reduction to absurdity of such notions: that marriage with a man called Earnest can be a goal in life” (1997, p. 172). Such kind of love cannot be more than loving a man who is appreciated and welcome by the public. Jack’s true character therefore loses its significance. Although Jack tries at once to confess his true name and identity to Gwendolyn, she appears so taken by the idea of Jack as Earnest that he turns about the possible concession. She runs the mentality she has acquired with respect to the society she was grown up in, which is, judging men by their appearances, names, or physical conditions. In return, Jack ends up with covering the truth, with the hope to keep Gwendolyn.

Cecily also falls for Algernon’s name as “Earnest” the moment she first observes him. Algernon never intends to expose his real name to her. Like Jack, Algernon is unhesitant while communicating with Cecily by presenting his false identity, since Cecily has already fantasized about him as if he carries all the requirements under his name. It is not an ideal in her mind anymore; it has turned out to be her reality. Cecily’s acceptance of the marriage proposal by Algernon is the ultimate end in this respect: “You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months” (II p. 68). Cecily’s creation of a fantasy in her mind about Algernon and their relationships only functions to certify the means through which women and men imagine each other before, and during relationships. Even though Algernon is in the recognition of Cecily’s obsession with the images she forms, he does not spoil the game for the same reason as Jack’s. Algernon and Jack are not able to handle the thought of being denied of women, and public acceptancy. Possible revelation of the truth vindicates that they are both deceiving individuals and inappropriate mates for the women. Cecily and Gwendolyn would break off the engagements; further, opportunity for them to mate with “ideal” women in the future would be forever perished. As powerful representatives of the concept of Victorian woman, these two ladies conduce to the illusions Algernon and Jack create. These characters should be read from a larger perspective in order to see how the constructs rendered “authentic” in the Victorian society. The allowance they get from these

two women implies that they will be recognized by the whole society. The consequence of such pressure occurs as leading two lives at once; only in this way can they please their mates, the society, and hence, themselves. Interestingly, even after Cecily and Gwendolyn found out the truth regarding these men, they passed it over quickly without a significant degree of fierceness shown. These men did not fulfill the pledge their names promised; so, they should be deserted by the women, which could prove the women's dignity and endurance. Standing as the exemplary figure and demonstrating their potency to meet the demands of the Victorian society did not seem possible for them without changing their names. An obvious satire of the quality of earnestness is made by Wilde here due to the fact that it is not the women who make these men manifest themselves. Cecily and Gwendolyn, despite facing their untruthfulness and indecency, still desire them. The imbalance between expectations and reality stems from the irony that it is much more essential to feed various desires and images of ideal men than to see men experience those alleged properties in their real lives. These men undermine the idea of solidity sought in a male identity as expectations and reality intertwine and lose their attributed meanings.

Victorian conviction of the idea of "gentleman" is a notable theme in the play. Lady Bracknell's harsh rejection of her daughter's relationship with Jack is a proof in this point. She confronts her daughter's purpose in that she cannot marry someone of her own decision. Her parents are there to ascertain the most eligible candidate. In this case, marrying is an action that she will find out only after she has done it; she needs to feel surprised following the marriage (I p. 27). Lady Bracknell prepares to interrogate Jack in order to find out to what extent he is a suitable man for her daughter. Besides, she stresses that she will be able to get his name on the list of suitable candidates only if he gives the needed answers to her questions. As a caring mother, she has the utmost right to query him. However, same Lady Bracknell is more than pleased to hear about her nephew Algernon's relationship with Cecily, since Cecily's grandfather was a respectable gentleman who had his name written on the "court guide". Jackson argues that

“Wilde simultaneously engaged with and mocked the forms and rules of Society. His stance as a dandy, a performer and (as an Irishman) an outsider gave him a particular use for the machinery and conventions both of the social world and of the Society drama of the theatre, which gave fictional expression to its values by dwelling on stories of fallen and falling women, reinforcing social and sexual discriminations, showing the righteous but hard consequences of maintaining ideals, and endorsing the cruel and absolute exclusion of those who erred”. (cited in Raby, 1997)

Jackson points out Wilde’s literary exposition of how society defines the relationships women and men get into. These relationships are both a factor and an outcome of gender constructions, acting as ladies or gentlemen being one example.

Throughout the Victorian age, including the late Victorian period, domestic life was promoted more than any other aspect of life. “Family” and “home” was carefully processed as to being the signifiers of peace and tenderness, which were strongly associated with the roles - “mother” and “wife” - of the middle class woman. In Victorian symbolism, “angel in the house” must be underlined as one of the most dominant figures in that it aims to maintain sympathy with the domestic Victorian woman, who is highly angel-like, selfless and helpful to her family in all respects, quite far from being erotic, and consciously depriving herself from desire and lust. Unlike the traditional female representations dating back to old times, which presented women as “femme-fatale” with uncontrolled sexuality and temptation, these angels were dignified and exquisite. Many writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, had already argued against the classical representations before the nineteenth century. “Angel in the house” was obviously simpler to deal with for the supposedly powerful male; beside her servitude which worked well for the benefits of men, such a representation enabled a sharp discrimination between the morality and strength of women. For instance, in Act I, Jack says it is not possible to tell the truth to Gwendolen about his identity because pure and innocent girls are not prepared to hear realities. He holds a very traditional perspective of gender here. They are too pretty to handle true stories. Considering this, the best option in terms of communicating with a woman, he concludes the way a typical male does, is making love. Indeed, it is the only method. As Algernon pays his courts to Cecily, she is ignorant about what word to speak. Algernon objectifies her,

resembling her to a rose, and falls over himself to charm her. However, Cecily is not impressed by his compliments, since so long as a man attempts to attract her attention and elevate her desires, she “shouldn’t know what to talk to him about” (II p. 53).

In the Victorian period, gender categorization as “women” and “men” was as significant as the religious doctrines in the prescription of morality. Ginger S. Frost in her book *Promises broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* discusses the way the female was perceived as inferior to men, and notes the qualities both women and men were expected to carry out in order to be regarded as honorable individuals. To begin with, a moral man should exhibit specific traits. A moral man was expected to be loyal to his promises, show the solidity, be courageous and bear the consequences of his deeds without complaining, be benevolent to his spouse by satisfying her needs in the first place- instead of his parents’, confront all his debts, regulate his temperament, be abstinent, be reliable in sex, brave, watchful, gallant, romantic, open, true-hearted, righteous, and free from his family’s instructions. These expectations are present in Gwendolen and Cecily. They regard Jack and Algernon’s desire to be re-christened as an example of courage. They think that men are more ready to sacrifice themselves for women than women are. In that case, there cannot be equality between women and men. The effort of these men are an implication of “physical courage” (III p. 95). The girls seem to be taken by the Victorian notions of manhood; so, they believe that ‘ideal’ men are moral and brave. They idealize Algernon and Jack; yet, the latter cannot live up to their ideals. From the perspectives of Cecily and Gwendolyn, Wilde enables us to explore the so-called “romantic” aspect of relationships by means of their communication with Algernon and Jack. They are not by any means interested in the financial wealth like Lady Bracknell has been. They need openness, honesty, earnestness. They have desired to get married to men who are “earnest” in personality at all times, instead of ones who are well-positioned or wealthy. A trait most probably common to all young women, the only aim Gwendolyn and Cecily have is to be guaranteed about the seriousness of these men’s purposes. They hold carrying the name "Ernest" equal to being "earnest". Hence, romanticism between a woman and a man is superficial, a term that does not signify anything real in a

relationship. Also, it can be recognized from these characters' approaches that there are gender differences between the way men and women romanticize relationships.

Algernon and Jack's wish or getting baptized may point out a concern which Wilde wants to examine – women's desire to transform the men in their lives. Indeed, women try to shape men according to their expectations imposed by the society. Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan* expresses his nervousness on these efforts, for example, by saying: "Ah! You are beginning to reform me. It is a dangerous thing to reform any one, Lady Windermere" (I p. 17). In *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert Chiltern regards this as a serious matter to deal with: "Why can't you women love us, faults and all?" (II p. 96). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, what Gwendolyn and Cecily are trying to do is to correct the mistaken side of Algernon and Jack, which is their failure to be Ernest. Although Miss Prism says that she does not support "this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice" (II p. 44), Gwendolyn, Cecily, Algernon and Jack think that change is vital, and has to be made. One can view Lady Bracknell as a bad copy of a Victorian mother figure whom Wilde condemns throughout the play. She may be functioning as a backbone which provides a central point for criticism. One ought to conceive the basis of the social constructs well in order to see and criticize them. She is not a character about whom any reality is revealed, exposed, or in whom any sort of transformation happens. Rather, unlike the others, she speaks like the agent of social norms and ethic: "Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that"; on the other hand, she gives green light to the existence of 'dandyism': "The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile" (III p. 101). She expresses her observations of the realities of the age. She seems to criticize them. In her talks, one sees the hints of many ideas appreciated and applauded by the society even though the ideas abound with insincerity and deceit. This is obvious when she comments: "To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable" (III p. 102). Again, she is totally

outspoken about certain facts. Her first encounter with Algernon as she enters the stage in the first act can be recalled:

Lady Bracknell: Good-afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

Algernon: I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

Lady Bracknell: That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together (I p. 18).

This sets the tone for all that is to follow. Appearing to be a fierce supporter of gender constructs, Lady Bracknell does not necessarily wear a mask and this makes her different from the other characters in Wilde's plays. Instead, she is the one who drops the masks. The youngsters – Algernon, Jack, Gwendolyn and Cecily, even Miss Prism wake up from their dreams concerning themselves and pass on to a more idle state due to her rigorous interrogations. Jack describes her as, "a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair" (I p. 33). Her devastating glimpses cause the youngsters to realize that their free will is not the first point to be considered while they are allowed to get married. While they were mostly in dialogues full of hints and wit far from constraint until Lady Bracknell enters the stage, when she does, the course of their conversations changes and they act as more compliant and childish figures. Wilde reveals how people, especially the ones at young ages, are concerned about compliance with the social influences surrounding them via the characterization of Lady Bracknell. From this moment on, Gwendolyn's phrase "yes, mamma" reminds us of the super obedient daughter, Agatha in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Also, Miss Prism feels terrorized upon Lady Bracknell's remarks: "(Catches sight of Lady Bracknell, who has fixed her a stony glare. Miss Prism grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape)" (III p. 108). Just as Lady Bracknell eases off on the characters and gives the comfort of acting in their usual ways, though, the characters take a breath and continue their own ways of talking. Although Lady Bracknell represents the dogmatic aspect of gender construction, she has many inconsistencies, social "faults" where she herself is aware of the falsities of the roles women and men perform.

Victorian society was discriminatory in terms of education. Male education was supported far above female education in the Victorian society, and it was a

significant difference in the constructed gender specifications. An intended derogation of the components of education is visible in the scene in which Lady Bracknell queries Jack on the issue of marrying to her daughter:

Lady Bracknell: I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: (After some hesitation) I know nothing. Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance...Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. (I p. 28)

Here, Jack alludes to the education of men. Accepting and appreciating the natural ignorance inherent in men is more valuable than hiding or trying to mould it into a certain shape. Wilde's statements concerning the issue of matrimony generally take place in the form of epigrams, ornamented with a language full of ironies. In *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s* (2001), Melissa Knox refers to this technique as ViMe "willfully self-contradictory". Some instances of ViMe occur when the characters complain about the fact that "The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life" (Wilde, 1892, p. 41), or when they declare, in a clever manner, that "It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing" (p. 47).

An undeniable fact about being accepted as a "real" man in the late Victorian period was its probability through marriage. Late Victorian society prescribed that for a man to exhibit his masculine qualities, he was obliged to prove himself via his skills to sustain his wife's household performance. He also had to get around home, work, and social life he held outside the family freely in order to reinforce his masculinity in the eyes of the public; not to mention that he had to be in a warm relationship with the other males around him. Specifically in this period, the connection among home, workplace, and social relationships was highlighted while it showed the degree to which a male was "man" enough. A single man is dangerous for the society, Miss Prism says, as he remains a seductive mediator among people. In Act II, she states: ". . . by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray" (p. 53). These men are not only threats for the women, but also they constitute danger for men; because men are seduced upon seeing them as

well. After marriage, the only agent a man looks charming is his wife, so the threat seems to disappear. Marriage is expected to tame men. Society does not tolerate unmarried men for so long.

Affirmation of masculinity in the form of a social position had a solid impact on the understanding of sexuality and sex amongst men. Historians such as Megan Doolittle and John Tosh examined the innate mobility of the forms of masculinity. These forms necessitated that men constantly hold the power in the family and protect their equivalence with the other males at work, and in their environment. Furthermore, maintenance and reinforcement of masculinity on a regular basis was surely necessary; male authority was established upon women, children, and also men that were declared to be “less” masculine than required. As Gwendolen says, papa, referring to “father”, is a term that gains meaning only in a family, and this is what it has got to be (II p. 75). Besides, every man pertains to his family, and he must remember his place all the time. Upon rejecting or ignoring his status within a family, people begin to think of him as unmanly, Gwendolen supposes. She becomes sarcastic at this point, as such condition of a man renders him enticing. Hence, is the enforcement of men to marriage and fatherhood a matter to be confronted, or supported? This is contradictory, as Gwendolyn’s statements show.

4.4 Wilde’s Pejorative Approach to Morals

Even the title of the play, “*The Importance of Being Earnest*”, signifies Wilde’s pejorative approach to morals. The word “earnest” symbolizes properness, dignity and sincerity. One can guess from the title that the play would involve a scrutiny of the worth of honesty and graveness. However, Wilde provides an exact opposite of that assumption. He becomes ironic and criticizes the social pretenses. People pretend to be earnest, but they are not. It seems a feature of the Victorian period to involve a concept of earnestness which is composed of honesty on one side and deception on the other. When people came across an issue, or a person, that is seemingly minacious, they struggled with that, basing their arguments, or reasons, on another sort of trickery. Two characters each of who enliven double identities, Jack and Algernon, are “honored” at the end of “*The Importance of Being Earnest*”, which shows that being earnest is not really

much important in the society they belong to. The play's subtitle, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People" proves the basic meaning in the play pretty well.

In Jack's case, the only reason for his pretending to be a man named Ernest when he goes to city center is the need to seem a moral man. His role as a protector of Cecily conduces a trustworthy image. As a parent, he must be trusted not only by Cecily but also every person that knows he looks after her. His duty is to serve as an ethical model on all topics. On the other side, he commentates on the exhaustive impact of such endeavor; a person may lose his/her health upon living this way, or would be a shadow of his/her former self. Hence, he escapes the burden of responsibilities by living a second identity in town, Jack, which is a truer representation of his desires. Algernon invents another fictional person, Bunbury, and tells people he will visit him, which helps him set himself free of societal restrictions, so he travels out of town for getting involved in activities of his desire. Keeping company with Bunbury the fictional friend earns Algernon the chance to taste happiness. He also thinks such double lives will be searched for in marriages. Otherwise, the institution itself will only produce desperate people.

Richard Foster states (1956) that Wilde creates a world in which "real" values are inverted, reason and unreason interchanged, and the probable defined by improbability" (pp. 19-20). He is subversive. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, women and men that Wilde builds attract attention with their distance from harsh and strict rules. Even Lady Bracknell, who can be accepted as the embodiment of traditions, shows a series of unconventional behaviors that are inconsistent with her strict adherence to traditions. Obviously, the play does not issue a "cultivated society" whose regulatory norms have been paralyzed for a specific amount of time; contrary to that, it almost introduces us to gender behaviors which characters dream of, and attain, through a disclamation of morals, discipline, and norms.

Social hypocrisy of the late Victorian period is well represented through characters such as Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He pretends to act as an extremely moral man. On the other hand, he had been carrying multiple identities in himself so that he could experience a life of his own desires without being pressurized by the moralities. It is a frequent incident for Jack to share

anecdotes on moral values and suitable manners throughout the play. For instance, he rebukes Algernon because he behaves “ungentlemanly” (I p. 11) when he attempts to check the writings in Jack’s personal cigarette case. Also, following the death of Thomas Cardew, Jack took on the care of Cardew’s grandchild, Cecily. For this reason, he argues that he is obliged to “adopt a high moral tone on all subjects” (I p. 14), as Cecily will most probably model him when she grows up. In the meantime, he is not as decent as he claims he must be. In Act I, he exposes the reality about his London visits, explaining that he gets on the role of Ernest, his imaginary sibling, during those visits. Instead of Jack’s self-portrayal of a truthful and responsible identity in the country, the identity Ernest “gets into the most dreadful scrapes” (I p. 14); besides, he is claimed to act rather recklessly and immorally. Jack seems content with the two identities he carries, because while he highlights his own critical position in being a role model for Cecily by his Ernest identity, he does not forget to inform that “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness” (I p. 14). Jack stands as the perfect exemplification of the ways Wilde questions the wholeness and flawlessness expected from men. Even a character who may appear wholly “ethical” at the start will have flaws, and being male does not create an exception, just as it does not in *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

Dandyism questions the traditional notions of gender. Characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* make reference to various traits of dandies. To illustrate, Algernon conceives, “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” (I p. 34). Lady Bracknell, who one can refer to as the female dandy of the play, comments on the corruptness of education as she claims education does not have any effect (I p. 28). Cecily satirizes the condition of women who constantly dedicate themselves to charity work (II p. 73). These characters are differentiated from the dandies of the former plays with respect to their implicit but inexorable criticism on the superficial “truthfulness” of the “earnest” people of the society. Marriage and the family union is not the mere center of criticism in the play; it scorches the means through which society evaluates, devaluates, elevates or degrades them, depending on the situation.

The most striking example is Jack and Algernon's efforts to arrange a private space for themselves, where they could perform any activity they wish outside the family borders. What they did was known as a widespread feature of the Victorian society, just as it is across many societies today. The "Club" has surely been a place answering their purposes. On the other hand, a man's taking the responsibility of his actions, like Algernon's of his Bunburying, in a severe mood seems an unusual case. All concepts of dignity and correctness are jeopardized at this point. In the scene where Algernon claims to be a serious performer of Bunburying, Jack reacts priggishly: "Serious Bunburyist! Good heavens!", and Algernon answers provokingly: "Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying" (II p. 86). The argument that one has to be serious, especially within the social environments, would probably be agreed by the majority of the Victorian people. However, it is not a valid way in the seeking of pleasures. Nor is this all; when one is serious about being a Bunbury, this in turn underlines the deceitfulness of the others who perform Bunburying, but are not solemn about it. Jack's priggish reaction depends on this reason. Like Algernon, he has acted as a Bunburyist for some time. He has not called his acts by a specific name or tried to draw borders, though, and this separates him from Algernon. Speaking the truth of each person, whether pleasant and flattering or not, would be the biggest discourtesy to the Victorian construct of dignity. "Calling a spade a spade", as Cecily notes, could not have been very well received. Gwendolen also jibes at the surface dignity of the society she has been in, referring to Cecily's words: "I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different" (II p. 79). Hence, ignoring the existence of hypocrisy meant posing as it was not real. Wilde certainly wishes to reveal it throughout the play, though. Cecily answers for this wish when she says: "This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners" (II p. 79). Wilde defends the necessity of revelation and exposal of the hypocritical establishment of identities and relationships, the values which not only the elegant society but also lower class levels of the Victorian period built their existence on. Maybe gone unrecognized by the late Victorian audience but well-conceived by the audience of our age, the humor Wilde derives via the act of Bunburying is plain when Jack introduces himself with a name to his female

counterparts in the country, and with another name to his male counterparts in the town. The reason why the late Victorians would not take this as an apparatus for humor was that revelation of the double identity a -contingently- bisexual man could by no chance be a tool of joke, as it would damage their dignity. When Wilde was tried for homosexuality, society's ruthless response showed it clearly. However, from Wilde's perspective, the same act of Bunburying had the utmost position in pleasure and satisfaction. This sort of a humor material was supposed to be popular in that it could either bypass the middle class people, or irritate them in a way.

Algernon can be considered as the male dandy figure of the play in that he does not possess a great sensitivity of moral constructs, whereby criticizing social enforcements. His depiction as a sensible bachelor equipped with wit and also fashionable clothes is a separation for him from the rest of the characters. He frequently conveys his notions on social life and its units, wedlock being one of them: "It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal" (I p. 8). Algernon is aware that when marrying comes on the stage, relationships turn into business deals; when a proposal is made and it is accepted, love and the values it involves, such as courtship, imagination, or fantasy, are terminated. Ironically, he denounces that if a wife fancies her husband, this gets scandalous. Algernon does not possibly keep track of any traditional rules of morality. He does not suit the traditional manhood in this respect. The portrait Algernon draws here by not following fixed conventions, either in marriage and courtship, or in terms of personality traits, is the clear implication of his ambition and desire in leading a life free from morals. This man contradicts with the dream character "Ernest", who is supposed to live depending on the commands of the authority, design, and rules. By integrating the world of a character such as Algernon into the orderly frame of Ernest, Wilde attains the association of contrasts, without ignoring the use of various mockery. In this world, women as well as men can act as the "hunters" and demonstrate powerful attitudes while prioritizing themselves. Such shifts in the meanings loaded on genders allow Algernon to surround himself with a setting he wishes to.

Religion is one of the most effectual topics for Wilde in deconstructing genders, where he is profane as much as he is in the topic of marriage. Algernon and Jack heavily feel the obligation to get themselves re-baptized merely to compensate the desires of the girls, in other words, be named as "Ernest". The symbolization lying beneath this attempt is that by changing their names, Algernon and Jack will not only be re-named, but also they will have reborn as decent men. Their newborn version will be "earnest" in quality, since Jack's statement in the closing line shows, "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (III p. 116). These men seem to have given up their act of Bunburying; they have acknowledged their true names. Jack has reunited with his parents; Algernon has made up for his debts. Ironically, none of these developments has connection with devotion to religion, or God, in real terms. Algernon and Jack conceives the baptism practice only as an "inconvenience" they have to put up with for the aim of converging with their fiancées. This scene embodies the meaninglessness of baptism concept itself as a ritual for Wilde correlates it with such absurd conditions. Wilde's creation of this act via Algernon and Jack ensures that any person can be born again at any time. Dr. Chasuble clarifies this notion well when he says, "the sprinkling, and, indeed, the immersion of adults is a perfectly canonical practice" (II p. 57). Gwendolen and Cecily, on the other hand, perceive this venture to be amusing and arousing curiosity. Since these designed baptism practices recall the tragedies handled by the knights of the medieval ages, they surely exhibit the degree of love:

Gwendolyn (to Jack): For my sake, you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

Jack: I am.

Cecily (to Algernon): To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

Algernon: I am.

Gwendolyn: How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes. Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

Jack: We are (clasps hands with Algernon).

Cecily: They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing. (III p. 95)

On Lady Bracknell's side, majority of the dignified Victorians would agree with her reply to the news she has heard about the two baptisms: "At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious. Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. I will not hear of such excess. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money" (III p. 106). The defining effect of a religious construct over the shaping of a man's social existence is definitely under attack. Whether done at an early age or a late one, Wilde devalues and mocks a religious ritual which is seen essential to prove a man's dignity in society and his relationships.

Considering all these, it can be stated that Wilde underlines the insignificance of issues taken seriously in gender roles, such as marriage and courtships. He questions the concept of not only marriage, but also engagement and flirtation in the late nineteenth century mostly through Lady Bracknell, a speaker for all the deep-seated values in the society. She speaks in the manner of mocking the procedural marriages imposed by and within the upper class. Her commentary on Algernon stands as a summary of the perspective through which the characters see each other: "Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?" (III p. 103). This is a mockery and criticism of the superficial values of the upper class society, values which gender identities are built on.

5. CONCLUSION

As one of the most eminent writers and thinkers of the late Victorian period, Oscar Wilde deconstructs the socially defined gender identities by violating themes such as marriage, seduction, innocence, love, or living as an old maid in his three plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He benefits from the stock characters of eighteenth and nineteenth century British literary tradition, with several significant changes in the dialogues they would typically be expected to make. Although they initially seem to, neither the young nor the elder characters respect and follow the gender norms properly, hence they spoil the fixed assumptions on their identities. Marriage and the process that leads to it is an essential topic to investigate. Each and every relationship is concluded with the idea that couples, either deliberately or not, fail to meet the demands of the society with respect to the execution of proper gender behaviors. Wilde undermines the meanings of "relationship" and "coupling", wiping away the concept of "good" or "bad" women and men. While flirtation and marriage were seen as a job in the Victorian society, Wilde has his characters to play with them like a game so that womanhood and manhood turn into costumes they put on to take off any time possible. Dialogues on sexuality are rather common, but marriage is regarded merely as a platform of display for what social norms ask of the genders. Wilde thinks of sexuality as free from all social restrictions. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, "Wilde makes the most of sexual imagery from earlier Victorian poets and sexual conventions from earlier playwrights, distinctly qualifying with his wit both moral associations and moral endings, both aesthetic and social meanings" (Johnson 1984 p. 197). By referring to former plots and making allusions, he makes fun of the gender beliefs fixated on women and men, and trivializes the ways these beliefs are interpreted.

In all three plays, the characters renowned for their virtuousness are prone to either tempting or be tempted. In both *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal*

Husband, implications of infidelity can be recognized from the very start of the plays. The wives of Lord Windermere and Robert Chiltern ultimately face the fact that no matter how much they idealize the concept of fidelity and loyalty in their minds, ideals need to collapse at the end. Both marriages and the process preceding them involve a lot of lying, pretending and acting; women and men do not properly enact the gender roles expected of them. All three plays allow a considerable space to the dandy characters in this respect; they play a critical role in leading both female and male characters to violation of their gender roles. They may seduce female characters, or get them to take action as men do, while a man's deeds, considered as crime in the eyes of the public, may be justified and oversimplified by a dandy's speeches. In other words, dandies have the role of teaching the characters how to disrupt socially imposed gender beliefs. An instance to that is when Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* causes Robert Chiltern to expose his past deeds about politics to Lady Chiltern. This is a turning point in the play as Sir Chiltern's image as the ideal man to his woman is shattered. Goring's manners are independent, eye-catching and engaging. Each word he utters includes criticism related to gender traits and marriage; his thoughts are freed from traditional Victorian norms. He has a huge impact on Lady Chiltern's open-minded speeches and changing approach to sexuality. Another example is that in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Darlington approaches Lady Windermere in a seductive way similar to Goring does, making her feel unfulfilled with her marriage and realizing the flaws of her husband, whom she used to view as perfect. Lady Windermere is renowned for her virtuous Victorian female identity. Then, similar to Lady Chiltern, she is awakened to the strong desire to experience an independent life. Wilde does not have these two females explicitly mention a pressure they feel with respect to the limits of their sexuality; however, they recognize the superficiality of marriage, relationships, and the gender responsibilities they load on people, so they bend the rules. We witness exquisite dialogues where these situations are mocked, and socially constructed female and male features are deconstructed. In addition, these women are not treated in an extremely delicate manner by the dandies; dialogues abound with discussion on various social matters. Besides the characters, audience is provided with several messages concerning the futility of gender norms. These women do not commit physical adultery, but

they violate the concepts of purity, innocence, and decency. What they have been through is the removal of mental borders. Dandies, in this respect, seduce them implicitly into criticizing the social dogmas and restrictions without fully separating from them.

Financial riches in marrying process is an essential issue with respect to the allocation of gender traits. The satirical statement Wilde presents as “wealth conquers all” (*An Ideal Husband*) and depiction of money as “holy” and being connected to God (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*) mock the settled belief that a woman ensures her satisfaction in life with money. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell questions Jack about his riches in a humorous manner and the whole scene makes the idea of riches as a necessary part of a man’s identity frivolous.

Wilde's comedies have left their mark on the late Victorian period due to the witty use of language and its creation of a chaotic atmosphere where all gender constructs were to be reexamined. Epigrams are so common in all characters’ speeches. Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* speaks of loyalty, a prerequisite while performing gender roles properly in relationships, as merely a word when he says: "In married life, three is company, and two is none". Furthermore, his statement, "the truth is rarely pure and never simple" indicates the improbability of defining the correct and the incorrect, and the falsity of drawing strict borders between these two. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell can be considered as the female dandy due to her strength and wit, being a contradictory figure to the proper construction of womanhood. Her satirical expressions, such as the resemblance of ignorance to an exotic fruit, and many more which reveal the groundlessness of marriage cause confusion in the audiences’ minds and lead them to re-evaluate all the responsibilities women and men undertake.

Besides the witty humor, Wilde’s creative dialogues, weaved with a specific style, greatly help the deconstruction of gender beliefs in an aesthetical way. These enable the audience to remain at a certain distance from the definitions of womanhood, manhood, proper marriage, love, or courtship, while they are within the boundaries of the settings they are familiar with. One cannot call these plays guidelines to appropriate gender identity performances; neither does

Wilde aim to give educative messages through employing mere wit. Indeed, similar to the act Nietzsche refers to as “transvaluation”, he urges a reconsideration of all roles attributed to the sexual identities. As a result, “everything that the society puts forward as its sanctities is treated with delightful casualness” (Henkle, 1980, p. 306). In other words, Wilde replaces the fixed gender behaviors with shady, questionable situations where it is not possible to decide if a woman acts as a proper woman, or man as a proper man.

Such shifts in the fixed gender constructs are based on a humorous style and expose the instability of the values upon which these constructs are built. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a typical humor is presented in a typical Victorian setting with a number of norms echoed throughout the play, but characters disprove them by mockery, shifts in meaning and witty dialogues. Sexual identities, with all their norms, were indicators of Victorian lifestyle, and their deterioration would be a groundbreaking event. The pattern Wilde follows in these plays is designed ingeniously, rather than ethically.

As genders are freed from the rules that shape them in certain ways, audience is allowed to think beyond the borders. They are exposed to the necessity to bend their traditional perception of gender identities for understanding the characters. Therefore, they are to perceive meanings that are left outside of what they know as real. Gender identities as social constructs lose the immutability they are attributed in this way. Wilde brings together unrelated ideas and incompatible constructs side by side, creating a chaos of womanhood and manhood.

All three plays handle the subject of adultery in marriages with a lot of mockery. Marriage as the solid indicator of gender responsibilities can so easily fall apart. Lady Plymdale in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* implies that assuming her husband commits adultery, she will be glad to follow her own desires. The identity of Victorian woman, trying to force her husband to commit, is perfectly subverted. Mrs. Cheveley’s reference to her affairs in her past marriages in *An Ideal Husband* shows how simple it is for her to publicly speak of the adultery she committed; this makes her desire to marry Lord Goring even more insignificant. As for the concept of love and relationships, it is certain that there is no sincerity in the feelings she has, similar to the feelings Gwendolyn and Cecily have for Algernon and Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Marriage is not more than a game in all these plays. Characters try to prove their manly traits by getting acceptance into an institution where none of the promises are kept. Women, on the other hand, violate all the borders drawn for them by the society while fulfilling their traditional roles as wives, daughters and lovers.

Courtship, like marriage, is helpful in the deconstruction of traditional gender roles in Wilde's plays, especially in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. In the latter, Agatha's flirtation with Mr. Hopper is seriously trivial, involving Agatha's mother as the manager of the whole process. Her mother trivializes both the process of marriage and the way her daughter gets into a relationship as a woman.

In addition, *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* convey the message that the more pressure society applies on people in order for them to follow the designed gender paths, the more deviation people show. Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband* contravenes the ethics of a respectable man with his past deed, and deceives people around him further, most importantly his wife, as he keeps it a secret. The way Wilde mocks courtship is an indicator of how much he despises marriage and relationships. Gender preferences are imposed by the social norms, not made on individual level. All three plays focus on this motif. They point out the need to perform gender behaviors in line with individual freedom, contrary to the belief that women and men are to internalize what is socially given. Characters in these plays fulfill a kind of mission both internally and externally; they recognize and follow the ways they personally like to, and exhibit these up to a considerable level, a level which causes the audience to get confused about the ethics of gender. Giving the initial impression of an obedient woman, Lady Windermere ends up with questioning her beliefs; Mrs. Erlynne, a femme fatale at the beginning, gains sympathy through her efforts as a mother. Neither purity nor mischief takes up completely in gender constructs. Therefore, the stock characters Wilde employs do not merely serve to reveal the trouble due to the social standardization of gender traits; they also demonstrate the internal journey to get to know one's own instincts and desires. Wilde presents these through a number of ironies. While the characters seem totally in harmony with the traditional conceptions of "moral" or "immoral" women, men, lovers,

husbands and wives, they prove the opposite and remove the distinctions between the ideal and the real. Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be given as examples. Though Mrs. Erlynne has a bad reputation with respect to her previous marriages and affairs, she demonstrates a much stronger attitude than the traditions presume in order to provide her daughter's welfare. Lady Bracknell, an embodiment of traditional Victorian gender beliefs at first glance, leads a number of mocking dialogues targeting matrimony, coupling, or male domination in the society. What they speak of completely contradicts with the physical impression they give.

The fact that Wilde undermines the fixed gender roles in these plays does not necessarily equal to the creation of a new basis on which genders can unchangeably be built. Common social beliefs regarding genders are constantly echoed, and implemented into the relationships. The essence of the social constructs exists in each and every scene, with a difference: they are rendered meaningless, providing no reason for anyone to rely on their validity and impact. Women seem to be fearful of creating disruption, whereas they are involved in acts that disrupt the foundations of womanhood. Men, known as protectors and providers, have little if any influence on arguments, decision-making, or conduct of relationships. Women's sexual attraction and innocence go hand in hand to have the men to follow what is dictated, which is another deconstruction of the familiar concept of womanhood.

In these plays, role of men as fathers and husbands are so weak; they are even nonexistent in some scenes despite the heavy conversations going on about them. Contrary to the traditional belief that men provide resources and support the family financially and emotionally, fathers in the play do not have a voice in the decisions given about their children's marriages. Husbands are totally silent against the weariness their wives express in relation to their own marriages. Shallowness of the identities men are women carry in marriages is revealed. Women may unleash their true power in terms of decision making, in contrast to the belief that men dominate and set the rules. Both immoral and moral manners possessed by the characters are left undefined, which removes the lines in-between and mixes them together.

Therefore, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde sensitizes the social divisions of genders up to such an extent that they crush and melt. Even though characters experience marriage of a relationship, they do not exhibit the presumed gender traits to each other. "Happy" endings are reached through a lot of sarcasm, questioning, and destruction of gender roles which the Victorian society defined people through. The way Wilde subverts the given roles is connected to his aim: a world where people are not held socially responsible for fulfilling certain gender roles is possible. Gender constructs limit people's natural instincts and tend to discipline them in ways that are bound to deviate some time in their lives. These plays manifest a meeting of traditions and disbelief; the former paves the way very well for the overturn of gender constructs.



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RESUME

Name Surname: Başak Çün

Place/Date of Birth: Tarsus/16.08.1986

E-mail: basak.cun@khas.edu.tr

Education:

2004-2008 Hacettepe University-English Language and Literature Department

2006-2007 Hacettepe University-English Language Teaching Department/
Pedagogical Formation

2010-2012 Marmara University-Master of Arts, Business Administration
Department/Management and Organization Program (up to dissertation stage)

2012-2018 İstanbul Aydın University-Doctorate (combined program), English
Language and Literature Department

Work Experience:

2008-2011 Avea Communication Services Inc.-Correspondence Specialist

2012-2015-Istanbul Aydın University, School of Foreign Languages-Lecturer

2015-.... –Kadir Has University, School of Foreign Languages-Lecturer

Languages:

-Turkish: Native Language

-English: Advanced

-German: Elementary

Skills:

-Effective communicator, achiever as an individual and in teamwork, problem solver
with a positive attitude, keen on fitness, creative, flexible

- Computer skills (Microsoft Office)

