

*Deposing Idealism in Oscar Wilde's  
An Ideal Husband*

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Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*<sup>1</sup> opened at the Haymarket Theatre in January 1895. As we notice in the title, the play arouses our interest, making us wonder what on earth an "ideal" husband is. The man alluded to by the title is Sir Robert Chiltern, an able politician. He has been an "ideal" for his wife, Lady Gertrude Chiltern, until his past life is revealed. Robert is blackmailed by a woman who knows his past, and is brought to a crisis of his political career and his marriage. The climax of the play is the scene where Gertrude, who was once an earnest supporter of the woman's liberation, swallows the double standard discourse, which Lord Goring infuses to her. This scene constitutes the very turning-point of the play, but there is no sufficient criticism which examines the abrupt change of Gertrude, observing what happened in the scene. In this paper, I will argue that the play shows that an "ideal" husband is the production of Gertrude's moral idealism and that Wilde's attitude toward ideals or idealism is condensed into the moment of Gertrude's conversion.

We can find some hints about Wilde's conception of an "ideal" in *A Woman of No Importance*. In the play, a conversation rises among the female characters as to the nature of the "Ideal" man. Mrs. Allonby says:

"The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious requests, and gratify every one of our whims [ . . .]" (481). Her long speech depicts the details of his conduct conforming to a schedule arranged to the minutes: he should make "a perfect terrible scene" and begin to reproach the woman "in less than twenty minutes," and he must leave her by "a quarter to eight" to find himself broken-hearted after all, until she forgives him. Considering Mrs. Allonby's words, the "Ideal" man, although he can offer "infinite expectation" to women, is equated with a stale and stereotyped man, who is to follow manuals and behave formulaically as he is expected. Here, Mrs. Allonby exaggeratedly mocks the ridiculousness of idealizing people.

We also get some information about the concept of an "ideal" from the conversation between Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon in *An Ideal Husband*, talking languidly about their "perfect husbands," who are so "flawless" that they are incapable of giving their wives "excitement in knowing him":

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?

LORD GORING (*smiling*): And those are the views of the two ladies who are known to have the most admirable husbands in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT: That is exactly what we can't stand. My Reginald is quite hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest element of excitement in knowing him. (523)

According to these two ladies, "ideal" husbands never exist, and, if they do exist, they are incurably boring men; they are too exemplary and typical to be attractive. Ideals seem to be high standards or principles for living, but the talk of the ladies in Wilde's plays suggests that ideal men are not real people but the projection of somebody's ideals, which are composed of typed or patterned images of men.<sup>2</sup> Thus, ideal men are modeled by those who impose their one's ideals on others, and such attitude is idealism.

An ideal husband is therefore a husband who is idealized by his wife. The "ideal" which is, Gertrude thinks, materialized in her husband is purity. And she believes that one must be "pure" in both private and public lives. Robert, a hopeful member of the Parliament, has promised Mrs. Cheveley to support the Argentine Canal scheme, which is a defrauding speculation and in which she has vastly invested. Robert was going to make a speech in the Parliament against the scheme, pointing out its corruption as a common swindle of Stock Exchange, but, blackmailed by Mrs. Cheveley, who holds a letter Robert wrote about twenty years ago as the evidence of his bribery in his youth, he consents to compromise. Gertrude, not knowing this, implores him to repel the

promise.

You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! Be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away—that tower of ivory do not destroy. (533-34)

In the eyes of Gertrude, Robert, who has always been her ideal and keeping his purity as a public man, is different from the impure people who know compromises and budge principles for secular purposes. He has been “something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain” (552).

Her pathetic claim for purity is caused from her idealism. She finds no gap between her idealistic image of her husband and the real Robert. Gertrude applies her doctrine of purity to both private and public spheres, believing their unity; Robert's private opinion and his moral purity must be manifested in the public. Robert says to her that “public and private life are different things. They have different laws, and move on different lines” (533). And he tries to persuade her that “sooner or later in political life one has to compromise.” He thinks that the public and private can be separate. Gertrude answers: “They should both represent man at his highest. I see no difference between them.” There is no legal obligation that one must live up to the principle of purity on

both sides of life; but to be pure is an absolute ideal for her, which she can never give way. A compromise is out of her head. She believes that, if he approves a sordid speculation in the public sphere, his private character will be spoilt for ever. He must not join the swindle and blot his high character as well as his career. Robert dares not destroy his wife's ideal by confessing his past crime. Gertrude finally makes him write the letter to dispel the proposal of Mrs. Cheveley.

Gertrude's way of idealizing her husband is not unique, when we consider the society at the time the play was written. It is related to so-called the "Woman Question," which had developed into hot debates. There was the growing movement for women's liberation including the high education of women and the suffrage campaign.<sup>3</sup> It challenged the Victorian double standard that limited women's domain separated from men's and claimed the single standard according to which women can have the same right and freedom as men. The movement inspired the theatrical tendency at that time. According to Kerry Powell, "the late Victorian stage is crowded with Sir Robert Chilterns" (90). Purity, which was the forcible and one-sided standard to judge women by, came to be no longer only women's. Male characters became the object of idealization, instead of being indulged. Powell introduces the play of Arthur Wing Pinero<sup>4</sup>, Wilde's contemporary dramatist, *Lady Bountiful* written in 1891, where a male character is asked to be "ideal of a husband" by a female character. Traditionally, it was women who were idolized as "domestic angels." In *An Ideal Husband*, however, Gertrude

applies the female standard to men. Such female characters trespassing on the borderline of the traditional gender, and feminized male characters, together with idealized husbands, came to appear in the contemporary theatre. The "New Woman" is one of the sensational consequences of the movement<sup>5</sup>. Gertrude is one such "New Woman" character. She is a member of the Woman's Liberal Association, which was actually found in 1886 and displayed political promotions for the suffrage, to aim for the liberation of women. She joins the campaign for "Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise" (541). It is natural for Gertrude, an earnest feminist, to demand the single standard point of view.

Besides the feminist activities at that time, Gertrude's insistence on "purity" is also reminiscent of the social purity movement in England, which grew in the 1880s; the word "purity" had an influential social importance.<sup>6</sup> In *A Woman of No Importance*, a MP named Kelvil, whose speeches are made up of the Victorian conventional opinions, harangues the importance of "purity." It is "the one subject of really national importance, nowadays [. . .]. I purpose addressing my constituents on the question before Parliament meets" (469). To threaten Robert to expose his past life, Mrs. Cheveley talks about the dreadfulness of the social voice that demands "purity."

Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven

deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. (528)

Mrs. Cheveley knows the power of the word “purity,” stirred by “modern mania for morality,” which is strong enough to get rid of public figures such as Robert, who is set up as “a paragon of purity.”<sup>7</sup> “Purity” is a mastery social discourse to ruin him. Gertrude’s idealism—we can call it moral idealism—overlaps with the social voice. It cannot be denied that she accepts the social values and holds it as her ideal.

In other words Gertrude’s advanced opinion is not her original view. To Lady Markby, who dogmatically but agreeably talks against “the Higher Education of Women” as a hindrance to a happy marriage, Gertrude answers: “Ah! it is heresy to say that in this house, Lady Markby. Robert is a great champion of the Higher Education of Women, and so, I am afraid, am I” (548). She is thus presented as a leader in the women’s lib movement, but her feminist belief is borrowed from her husband. Actually, the woman problem was the object of a heated debate at that time, and we can suppose that Robert, whose “name was received with loud applause” in the Woman’s Liberal Association, must have been known as a politician who favors women’s problem (541). Gertrude says to Lady Markby, who complains of her husband making political speeches loudly at home: “But I am very much interested in politics, Lady Markby. I love to hear Robert talk about them” (548). She often

listens to Robert's political opinions privately, and she borrows her opinion from her husband. As we have seen, Gertrude's idealism is more or less constituted of the outside voices. Through Gertrude, Wilde shows that any form of idealism, whether it is the insistence on the doctrine of purity or the single standard view, is based on the social discourses.

Yet, Gertrude's moral idealism is fatal enough for her husband. She says: "One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged." Her uncompromising way of life is applied "to every one, without exception," by which she is later to judge her husband (550). When the truth comes out that Robert sold the Cabinet's secret as a bribe for his ambition for success, their marital life and his political career fall into crisis. Gertrude cries: "And now—oh, when I think that I made of a man like you my ideal! the ideal of my life!" (552). Robert rebukes: "Let women make no more ideals of men! Let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!" (553). Robert is right: it is her stubborn idealism, her having made Robert "her ideal," that brings the ruins.

Through Lord Goring's wit, the catastrophe is avoided, and the play seems to move to a conciliatory ending. Mrs. Cheveley is removed from the stage and no longer appears in the last act. The letter which records Robert's past scandal is burnt, and he is saved from her blackmail. Robert seems to regain his political life. However, Gertrude's moral idealism still persists. Gertrude wants Robert to retire from public life.



SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: For although I am safe from detection, although every proof against me is destroyed, I suppose, Gertrude . . . I suppose I should retire from public life?

LADY CHILTERN: (*eagerly*) Oh yes, Robert, you should do that. It is your duty to do that. (576)

Robert's "duty" is, according to Gertrude, to receive the retribution of the past crime. She identifies her and Robert as outcasts, giving up any secular joy, and his retirement is the punishment, the natural result of the whole course: "We have both been punished," as Gertrude says. Offered a seat in the Cabinet by the Prime Minister, Robert declines the proposal, which is the peerless chance of a lifetime, for the sake of his wife, against his will. Lord Goring terms their decision "what is called nowadays a high moral tone" (578). He asks Gertrude, "Lady Chiltern, why are you playing Mrs. Chevely's cards?" Gertrude is trying to do the same thing as Mrs. Cheveley: to deprive Robert of his public career. If Robert accepted "Chiltern Hundreds"<sup>8</sup> as his name implies, the play would have ended with the victory of moral idealism. The life of the seclusion would have been prepared, as Robert disappointedly tells: "And you would be happy living somewhere alone with me, abroad perhaps, or in the country away from London, away from public life? You would have no regrets?" (576).

Suddenly, however, Gertrude compromises. Lord Goring's lecture prompts her unexpected conversion: "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" (579). Lord Goring's speech clearly exploits the conventional discourse of the double standard, manifesting the ideology of the separate spheres of men and women<sup>9</sup>. Gertrude listens to Goring's long speech and tears the letter which Robert has written to convey his intention to resign. She then echoes Goring's every word exactly:

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lies revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring. (579)

Hearing her say so, Robert gladly decides to return to his political life.

This abrupt change of Gertrude is astonishing, for she was once, though naïve, an earnest supporter of the equality between men and women. The scene makes the critics wonder the reason why Wilde allowed Lord Goring and Gertrude to replicate such extremely conservative view<sup>10</sup>. She now surrenders to the double standard. We cannot see any persuasive psychological motives for the conversion within her. She only repeats Goring's speech like a parrot, without any words that suggest her mental change. Still, her speech constitutes the very turning point for the play; were it not for Gertrude's compromise,

the play could not end with Robert's prospect for higher political status and the secured marriage of Chilterns.

This abruptness does not come from the playwright's carelessness or negligence, or his desire to lead the complicated plot into the neat ending. Here, Wilde is deliberately making Gertrude speak like a parrot. Through making Gertrude swallow the conventional view, he further exposes idealism as the mimicking of social discourses. The problem lies not in a feminist's conversion itself but in the ease with which she is able to echo double standard discourse. Just like the single standard which Gertrude once held, the double standard convention is another form of idealism. What is called the double standard is based on an abstract separation between male and female spheres and on a moral system assigning different ideals for men and women.

Gertrude's mimic tendency is also shown in the episode of the second blackmailing letter from Mrs. Cheveley, who, having failed to threaten Robert, tries to break the marriage of Chilterns by suggesting Gertrude's affair with Lord Goring. The scene discloses Gertrude's conventional temperament. Gertrude was told by Lord Goring to ask for his help if she needed it, and, after she knew Robert's past secret, she sent him a letter, saying "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude" (89). Mrs. Cheveley found the letter, left in Lord Goring's room, scandalous enough to invite the melodramatic interpretation of the situation. Gertrude explains the scandalousness by herself: "You want me to tell Robert that the woman you expected was not Mrs Cheveley,

but myself? That is was I whom you thought was concealed in a room in your house, at half-past ten o'clock at night?" (574). She dramatizes herself in the role of a suffering, victimized woman. She melodramatically laments "with a cry of pain": "Oh! you have saved his life; what have you done with mine?" (575). She shuts out any other solutions to clear the misunderstanding, even the simple way of telling Robert the truth, as Goring recommends. Goring says, "you are wrong," and he is quite right. In her head, there is the commonplace plot of the misunderstood, misfortunate wife.

After finding out that the letter is nothing more than the expression of her need of help, Robert admires her: "Had I fallen so low in your eyes that you thought that even for a moment I could have doubted your goodness? Gertrude, Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and sin can never touch you" (581). Gertrude settles down in the position of a "good" woman. She is set up as an idol of "goodness" which has bound women onto the pedestal and has limited their thought and behavior. The "goodness" assures women's total obedience to men, never to overstep into the male sphere. Gertrude is fixed in the proper, conventionally female position. In spite of her former authoritative way to her husband, Gertrude is a conventional woman after all.

Owing to Gertrude's embracing the double standard idealism, the play comes to a "happy" end. Gertrude ceases to one-sidedly impose the ideal of purity on Robert and accepts the ideal of female "goodness" for herself. The play ends with her words: "It is love, Robert. Love, and only love. For

both of us a new life is beginning" (582). However, this "love" is established on women's compromise. Robert's political life and their marriage are restorable only through Gertrude's sacrifice; for the sake of her husband, she must give up her ideal, which, however imitative it is, has constituted her view of life. This is an ironical ending, suggesting that idealism is necessary to maintain the established institutions and the status quo. People who embrace idealism are needed.

Wilde shows Gertrude's susceptibility to prepared discourses, revealing that any idealism of an individual is produced by the social institutions. He suggests that an attitude to believe that men and women must have the same law and another attitude to insist that men and women must live according to separate rules are both being idealistic; therefore, Gertrude can easily echo both idealistic views. Her conversion does not mean that she is enlightened and learns a certain new lesson of life, but that she can mechanically accept the prepared discourse of double standard and repeat it. Some critics try to explicate the ending with the premise that there are the characters' learning and growth<sup>11</sup>. However, we cannot find Robert's and Gertrude's growth or changes in the last scenes. There are no such human and organic developments in the characters and so that assumption cannot explain the ending brought by Gertrude.

Besides, it will miss Wilde's masterly presentation of Gertrude's idealism. Wilde once commented on the play: "It was written for ridiculous puppets to play, and the critics will say, 'Ah, here is Oscar

unlike himself'—though in reality I became engrossed in writing it, and it contains a great deal of the real Oscar! (qtd. in Eltis: 130)". As he says, the characters move like "ridiculous puppets" without psychological depths, revealing their imitative tendency. This is especially true with Gertrude, whose idealism is completely scraped and deposed.

Wilde's contemporary dramatist and critic Bernard Shaw damns Gertrude's "mechanical idealism" (239). His criticism is correct, but Wilde was rather sympathetic to Gertrude, who has "the passion that women have for making ideals"<sup>12</sup>; Wilde seems to know her mentality very well. He dramatizes the delusive but unceasingly obsessive need for ideals as the zeitgeist of the nineteenth century. "We live [. . .] in an age of ideals," says Gwendolen, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where being "earnest" is an "ideal" and, among the various types of men of ideals, an "earnest" type of men is chosen as the best sample (365). An ideal man is a typical man, or a certain type of man, who embodies a required ideology of the age.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Gertrude's energy of pursuing an ideal is to fix her husband into the "ideal" of purity. Wilde has observed people's desire to produce types around them:

Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live. And unselfishness is letting other people's lives alone, not interfering with them. Selfishness always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type. (*The Soul of Man*

*under Socialism*, 1194-95)

In *An Ideal Husband*, we can see his way of dramatizing the inducement to ask others to be a type, or an "ideal." In the play, the passion for age's ideals and the desire to stereotype coincide with the same nature, as we have seen in the relationship between Robert and Gertrude.

#### Notes

- 1 All quotations from Wilde's text in this paper are from *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, HarperCollins Publishers, published in 1994.
- 2 In *An Ideal Husband*, Robert is called as "a patterned husband" (548).
- 3 The first National Association for Women's Suffrage was formed in 1865. In the 1880s there were conflicts between the Prime Minister Gladstone and suffragists, including the members of the Woman's Liberal Association.
- 4 Arthur Wing Pinero is Wilde's rival contemporary dramatist of the society comedy, whose plays were at that time evaluated higher than Wilde's.
- 5 The "New Woman" is the term born from the dispute between Sarah Grand and Ouida. Their stereotypical image was frequently ridiculed in *Punch* cartoons. They were often taken up in the 1890s theatres. Among Wilde's contemporary dramatists, for example, Sydney Grundy wrote a comedy *The New Woman* and George Bernard Shaw took the subject in *Mrs Warren's Profession*.
- 6 The relation between the feminism movement and the social purity campaigns is observed in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact : Fin-de-siècle Feminisms*: "Another area closely connected with developments in feminism in the second half of the nineteenth century was moral reform," which started a campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. And the

abolitionists “joined forces with (other) social purists who were campaigning, more broadly [. . .]” (8). Richard Dellamora treats *An Ideal Husband*, relating the feminism with the social purity campaign: “The form of Lady Chiltern’s engagement—voluntary work conducted by the wife of an influential young politician—is consistent with the gradual modification of the ‘separate spheres’ rule as a consequence of the active participation of women in social purity agitation” (121).

- 7 The most well-known scandal of a politician who lost his political career was the case of Charles Stewart Parnell, by the reason of having an affair with a married woman in 1889.
- 8 “Chiltern Hundreds” is used as the office for a procedural device for Members of Parliament, who are forbidden to resign the seat, to allow the resignation from the House of Commons.
- 9 Such ideology is shown in well-known and influential writings such as Mrs. Ellis’ in 1843 preaching that good women must have a capability of feeling to fit a separate sphere and John Ruskin’s ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’ in 1865 that “The man’s power is active, progressive” while “the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle [. . .] . (qtd. in Eltis: 163)” They represent the conventional discourses for the Victorian double standard, though in the late nineteenth century they sound rather old-fashioned.
- 10 Joseph Bristow writes: “Yet the additional lines that she has learnt from Lord Goring on this matter sound somewhat hollow” and argues that “If such words provide the rationale for the enlightened belief that her husband should not sacrifice his career, they none the less suggest that Lady Chiltern can only assert this view on the grounds of her inferiority as a woman” (65-66). But he does not seem to give sufficient explanation of the scene. Katharine Worth says about Goring’s speech that “It is Wilde’s own philosophy of moderation and charity he expounds, though one must say, in



regrettably chauvinist terms" and finds it "a black mark for the debonair Lord Goring" (148). She suggests that this line is the failure for the play. Another critic, Richard D. McGhee argues that Lord Goring's speech expresses "Wilde's belief that spheres of value must be kept separate, not confused, in marriage or politics just as in art and morals" (294). On the contrary, Sos Eltis, feeling that "the conservatism of this speech comes as a considerable surprise," concludes that the play illustrates the danger of "the division of House and home, woman's and man's sphere" (166).

- 11 For example, Sos Eltis suggests the Chilterns undergo some growth: "Sir Robert Chiltern learns the danger of treating politics as an isolated province to which the normal rules of life do not apply [. . .]. Lady Chiltern learns to reject her absolute idealism and rarefied morality, finally allowing her chastened husband his seat in the Cabinet despite his feet of clay." However, Gertrude's "rarefied morality" is one version of idealism, and, as to Robert, Eltis argues that he "learns that public and private life are not different spheres," but Robert has the opposite view that the two spheres can be divided.
- 12 Wilde comments on his play: "Its entire psychology—the difference in the way in which a man loves a woman from that in which a woman loves a man, the passion that women have for making ideals (which is their weakness) and the weakness of a man who dare not show his imperfections to the thing he loves" (qtd. in Eltis: 159).

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