

OSCAR'S OXYMORONS

**POLITICIAN'S
SECRET
EXPOSED!**



IDEAL HUSBANDS AND MORAL POLITICIANS

BY LAURA HOPE

In Act I of *An Ideal Husband*, when Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert Chiltern, she tells the ambitious politician:

Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins one after the other...And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it.

“There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

- *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

**WIFE
SHOCKED!**



Mrs. Cheveley is quite correct. Chiltern forged his political reputation on the notion that he was morally incorruptible, and full of the ethical integrity. He forged his marriage on the same ideals. Both his career and his marriage would ostensibly topple in scandal if Mrs. Cheveley revealed he was, “a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.”

Although Oscar Wilde penned this scene in the 1890s, it seems ripped from contemporary headlines in the *New York Times*, or perhaps *The National Enquirer*. Political scandals are

as rife today as they were in Wilde's England, and still continue to blur the line between hard news and tabloid voyeurism. We grow quite nauseous over the petty details of politicians wallowing in their own moral shortcomings, hypocrisies, and career-ending political scandals: Senator Larry Craig's bathroom antics, Governor Elliot Spitzer's call girls, and President Clinton's penchant for the gag-inducing combination of big-haired bimbos, blue dresses, and misplaced cigars.

When such tantalizing horrors are revealed, they almost always include a politician standing before press microphones either emphatically denying or sheepishly apologizing for failures in his personal life that affected his political judgment. The humiliated, apparently supportive political wife is a necessary prop in this spectacle, standing silently by the side of her fallen, not-so-ideal husband. We are titillated and appalled by these widely broadcast dramas because of the numbing hypocrisy, shocking decadence, and total lack of self-control they reveal about our nation's leaders. These guys aren't any better than the rest of us, after all. In fact, maybe they are much worse.

Unfortunately, there are other scandals with far more serious implications: Nixon and Watergate, the “arms for hostages” scandal and Iran-Contra hearings of the Reagan years, the nebulous relationship between Enron and Vice President Cheney, misinformation regarding yellow-cake uranium, and the retaliatory outing of a CIA operative. It often seems as though only the most morally revolting and ethically unsound individuals end

up in politics. In *An Ideal Husband*, Oscar Wilde lets us know that it has always been thus.

The political climate in which Wilde lived was filled with scandal and intrigue. During the late Victorian era, it was not uncommon for the competing political parties to lavish peerages on anyone who could afford to buy them. Influence peddling was rife, leading to the Corruption Practices Act of 1883,

**BOY TOY
REVEALED!**



Oscar Wilde and young lover Arthur Douglas.

aimed at ending election corruption. Scholar Alan Doig argues,

The innovative, expansionist, and self-confident drive of the mid-Victorian era was steadily stagnating into complacency and materialism, with the upper strata of a rigid social-political hierarchy being penetrated by those who wished to trade their economic success for social advancement and political status and who found a welcome there from those who were prepared to overlook the lack of breeding when faced with a healthy bank balance.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley certainly fits this description. As she gleefully reveals, however, so does the supposedly stainless Robert Chiltern.

“One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.”

- *A Woman of No Importance*

In many plays popular in England during the 1890s, such as Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, the focus is on the “fallen woman,” who scandalizes society and threatens the very fabric of family life with her personal follies. In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde also gives us a fallen woman, Mrs. Cheveley, but she is not his primary focus. Wilde turns the genre on its head by telescoping his interest on a new target: the “fallen man.” Robert Chiltern is not just an idealized spouse come to ruin, as were the anti-heroines of the “fallen woman” plays, he is also an idealized politician, critically raising the stakes on his moral equivocations. His sins have much graver implications for the British realm.

In *Corruption and British Politics 1895-1930*, G.R. Searle documents the rampant influence peddling within England that at times made it appear as if the entire British empire was run by, “men with the manners of an organ-grinder and the morals of his monkey.”

**BOY TOY'S FATHER
THREATENS SUIT!**



The Marquess of Queensbury outed Wilde along with his own son.

**WILDE FAMILY
DEVASTATED!**



Constance and Cyril Wilde changed their surname to Holland.

Lady Markby ruefully notes the effect the ability to buy one's way into both politics and the British upper-crust has had on “society” when she laments:

...we scramble and jostle so much nowadays that I wonder we have anything at all left on us at the end of an evening...I always feel as if I hadn't a shred of decent reputation, just enough to prevent the lower classes making painful observations through the windows of the carriage. The fact is that our Society is terribly over-populated. Really, someone should arrange for a proper scheme of assisted emigration. It would do a great deal of good.

Those who “scrambled and jostled” to rule “society” also ruled the country. It was no coincidence that the Parliamentary season and the London social season ran concurrently. One dictated the other, revealing

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“Never speak disrespectfully of Society...Only people who can't get into it do that.”

- *The Importance of Being Earnest*

THE ULTIMATE OUTSIDER:

Oscar Wilde and English High Society

By Laura Hope

One of the ironies of Oscar Wilde's legacy is his reputation as one of the greatest satirists of English high society. He writes with an intimate knowledge of English culture, and a facility for wordplay and the mechanics of the English language arguably unparalleled by any other “English” writer, except perhaps Shakespeare. Oscar Wilde, however, was not English. He was an Irishman—hence the irony.

Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 to a family of the Irish Protestant ascendancy. His father was a distinguished surgeon, knighted by English royalty. His mother, however, had the greatest influence over Oscar Wilde. Lady Wilde was a writer and fervent Irish nationalist. Under the pseudonym “Speranza,” she wrote and published poetry, prose, and essays in support of the Irish nationalist cause. Her writing was often inflammatory to the British, and appeared to call for militant revolutionary action to free Ireland from British rule. In 1848, she released the excited proclamation in “The Hour of Destiny” that, “The long pending war with England has commenced!” This was shortly followed by, “O! for a hundred thousand muskets glimmering brightly in the light of Heaven!” in “Jacta Alea Est” (The Die Is Cast).



Caricature of Wilde as a pig, by Whistler (University of Glasgow, Birnie Philip Bequest)

The fact that the son of Lady Wilde, a.k.a. “Speranza,” should become known as one of the greatest “English” playwrights of the nineteenth century is astonishing. Many audience members (and even theater professionals) still labor under the misconception that Oscar Wilde was an Englishman. Oscar, however, was never allowed to forget he was emphatically not English, no matter how far he climbed the ladder of fame (or infamy) in their society. He was always an outsider, and perhaps his status as such accounts for his keen ability to dissect, vivisection, and eviscerate the rectitude of the British ruling class in sharply satirical plays such as *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *Lady Windemere's Fan*.

During Wilde's lifetime, few things were more damning for an aspirant to the hallowed halls of English society than being Irish. In the view of most good Englishmen in Victorian society, the Irish were entirely inferior to the English. Indeed, they were barely human. The English imagination categorized the Irish as a different and inferior race.

“WE IRISH ARE TOO POETICAL TO BE POETS; WE ARE A NATION OF BRILLIANT FAILURES, BUT WE ARE THE GREATEST TALKERS SINCE THE GREEKS.”

- Oscar Wilde

IF IN THE LAST CENTURY SHE TRIED TO GOVERN IRELAND WITH AN INSOLENT THAT WAS INTENSIFIED BY RACE-HATRED AND RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE, SHE HAS SOUGHT TO RULE HER IN THIS CENTURY WITH A STUPIDITY THAT IS AGGRAVATED BY GOOD INTENTIONS.

- Wilde on England's treatment of Ireland

Writing of the long, dysfunctional relationship between Ireland and England, Irish scholar Declan Kiberd observed, “If Ireland had never existed, the English would have invented it...” Kiberd goes on to assert that Ireland's usefulness to England centered on its designation as “not-England.” An English/Irish binary evolved over the centuries quite different from the relationship England developed with other colonized geographies and people. Ireland became a major factor in determining English national identity as the Irish were increasingly cast as England's opposite: The English were civilized, the Irish were not; a proper Englishman was Protestant, the Irish were deluded by popery; the English were logical, intelligent, thinking people with self control, the Irish were emotional, superstitious, ignorant, ruled by their emotions, and generally out of control; the English were humans of the white race, the Irish were, well, not. The English racialized Ireland while constructing their own sense of England's ethnic national identity. By categorizing the Irish as an inferior race, the English formulated a mission and a

rationale for their continued colonization of Ireland and the oppression of the Irish people.

By the eighteenth century, Ireland was for all intents and purposes enslaved to England under the Penal Laws, which regulated and restricted absolutely every aspect of life for the Irish people, and established Irish Catholics as an oppressed race. Under the Penal Laws, Irish Catholics could not vote, hold public office, teach or open a school, practice law, serve in the military or civil service, attend university, educate their children abroad, manufacture or sell arms, newspapers or books, buy,



Wilde, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

OH, I LOVE LONDON SOCIETY! I THINK IT HAS IMMENSELY IMPROVED. IT IS ENTIRELY COMPOSED NOW OF BEAUTIFUL IDIOTS AND BRILLIANT LUNATICS. JUST WHAT SOCIETY SHOULD BE.

- *An Ideal Husband*

inherit or receive land from a Protestant, or own a horse worth more than five pounds. The Irish language was outlawed as well as much of its music and literature, and Irish children were forced to learn English as their primary language in school. This is just a partial list of restrictions under the Penal Laws. During the Great Famine, stores of food were sent from warehouses in Ireland to England and its other colonies, while the Irish starved to death in the millions in what hindsight can only consider a form of ethnic cleansing. Scholar Theodore Allen makes an interesting comparison: "If from the beginning of the eighteenth century in Anglo-America the term 'negro' meant slave, except when explicitly modified by the word 'free,' so under English law the term 'hibernicus,' Latin for 'Irishman,' was the legal term for 'unfree.'"

Depictions of the Irish as an inferior race were common from academic texts to newspapers, and popular culture magazines. By the Victorian era, the British began to depict the Irish as "black" with all the attendant racist connotations that accompanied white, English attitudes toward that



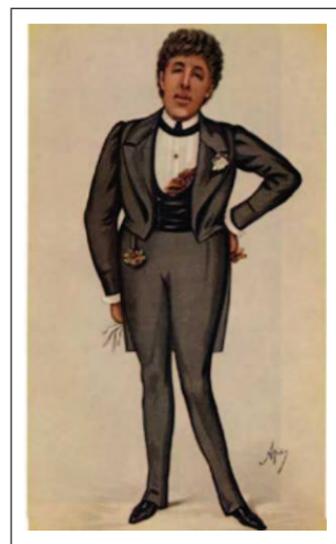
Caricature of Wilde dressed as a woman, by Alfred Bryan

racial designation. The Irish were frequently drawn in print illustrations and cartoons as apes in both England and its favorite former colony, the United States. American racial theorist Richard Dyer argues,

With the rise of the Fenian movement for Irish liberation, British representation of the black Irish intensified, notably through a comparison of the Irish with chimpanzees and gorillas, the first live specimen of the latter being brought to London in 1860 with great public success. The idea that the Irish could be looked on as the 'missing link' between apes and humans ran through both written and visual satire of the period...In one 1881 *Punch*

cartoon... a stiffly upright, unblemished, white-faced Britannia is cast in the classic imperial role of protecting the good native (a straight-haired, white-limbed girl) against the hairy, gesticulating ape-like rebel native, while in an 1876 *Harper's Weekly*...black and Irish are both equated in the US context as members of what might today be called the political underclass. *Puck* 1880 in shows both John Bull and Uncle Sam consulting over what to do with the marauding Irish ape.

The *Punch* cartoon from 1881 is a revealing example of how an Irish man was depicted by Victorian society. The Irishman has an ape's face, with a flat nose and scraggly facial hair. His lips are pulled back in an apish grimace bearing over-sized teeth in what appears to be a growl. His body, however, is drawn as stereotypically "paddy Irish." From the neck down he looks as if he just stepped out of a Dion Boucicault melodrama in the role of the drunken gombeen, complete with Irish peasant clothing and a beer belly. He wears a leprechaun-type hat bearing the word "anarchy" pulled down sinisterly over his eyes, and he is poised in rage with a rock in hand, which he is ready to hurl in the face of Britannia.



Wilde caricature in *Vanity Fair*, 1884.



"Two Forces," John Tenniel, 1881, from *Punch*.

Oscar Wilde himself was caricatured variously as a pig, a woman, and an ape. In 1884, *Vanity Fair* caricatured Wilde as "black Irish" from the neck up, while from the neck down, he was drawn as an English dandy. The illustration embodies the dual identity Wilde held in British society. He might appear to be a proper society gentleman, but one could never forget that he would never really be "one of them." You could dress Wilde in a nice tuxedo and give him a dandy's pose, but he would always be an Irishman, and hence, an outsider. Wilde's status as an outsider was further compounded in 1895 when, just a few months after the premiere of *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde was publicly outed for his not-so-secret homosexual affair with the son of a member of British high society. This outing was followed by Wilde's arrest for gross indecency, a trial, and bankruptcy. Wilde was eventually sentenced to two years hard labor in prison. Four years after his release, he died in exile in France in 1900. He died largely destitute and alone, without finishing other writing projects. One of his final acts was to be baptized into the Catholic church.

Given the status of Irishmen in general and Wilde specifically, it is perhaps no surprise that the British ruling class is the primary target of Wilde's critiques in his satiric plays, hurling epigram

after epigram at them. His comedies of manners are replete with barbs against the giants of English society, such as this piece of witty, verbal napalm delivered by Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*: "Oh, I love London society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what society should be." Wilde's facility with the English language was shared by George Bernard Shaw—that other Irishman people like to classify as "a great English dramatist." Shaw was a fan of Wilde's work, and wrote disdainfully of English critics' reaction to *An Ideal Husband*: "They laugh angrily at his epigrams like a child who is coaxed into being amused in the very act of setting up a yell of rage and agony."

Wilde moved among the giants of British high society, but never quite reached their lofty heights. His awareness of his precarious status seems to appear in the verbal pyrotechnics of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where he wrote, "Never speak disrespectfully of Society... Only people who can't get into it do that." Wilde did speak to English society with barbs and criticisms—and he never achieved acceptance from them during his lifetime. He remained the eternal outsider: born in Ireland, celebrated, but then reviled and imprisoned in England, and finally exiled to France, where he faced a lonely death. It was a tragic ending for an Irish genius of great insight and comic skill.

Laura Hope is Cal Shakes' Resident Dramaturg.

TO GET INTO THE BEST SOCIETY, NOWADAYS, ONE HAS EITHER TO FEED PEOPLE, AMUSE PEOPLE, OR SHOCK PEOPLE— THAT IS ALL. - *A Woman of No Importance*

OSCAR'S OXYMORONS

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how intertwined and inbred British politics and the wealthiest strata of British society were. It was a delicate balance because then, as now, the press was watching, waiting to pounce. Mrs. Cheveley threatens: "Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the foulness of the headlines." Think of it he does.

Chiltern finds the balancing act exhausting. He is caught between his ambition and his need to live up to the elevated reputation he helped craft for himself as an ideal husband and politician. In the end, the intercession of a powerful friend allows him to avoid political and personal ruin.

Perhaps this was wishful thinking on Wilde's behalf. He knew only too well the danger of balancing a dual identity. Just a few months after *An Ideal Husband* premiered, Wilde convulsed the same high society he skewers in his plays when his own personal scandal was revealed. He was also a fallen man and a far from ideal husband. Wilde showed his character, Robert Chiltern, more mercy than British society showed Oscar Wilde. Wilde leaves it to the audience's imagination what Chiltern will do with the second chance Wilde himself never received.

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