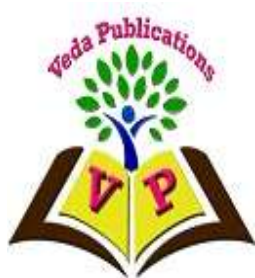


**EXPLORING HUMAN RELATIONS IN OSCAR WILDE'S 'AN IDEAL HUSBAND'**

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An Ideal Husband is a play dealing with politics. However, keeping politics as the background, Oscar Wilde has explored the various dimensions of human relationships. Thus, we have a couple in the form of Sir Robert Chiltern and Gertrude Chiltern, Lord Goring- Robert's best friend along with Mabel Chiltern (Robert's sister) and the pivotal character of the entire play Mrs. Cheveley. The relationship between and amongst these characters explore in various depths the dimensions of human relationships. These relations move simultaneously and the intervention and support of each other gives meaning to their existence. Let's explore the various webs of human relationships.

**Keywords:** *Politics, Friend, Husband – Wife, Patriarch.*

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To begin with, we find that Robert is a great public and political figure. He is a great success but this story of success has deceit beneath its origin i.e. it's by selling some cabinet secret to the opposing party that Robert got the beginning of his career. However, as far as his home life is concerned, Robert has never been able to share this truth of his life with his life partner. We find Robert's fear of the consequences of confessing the truth as he indulges in a discussion with his friend Lord Goring:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.... Arthur, I couldn't tell my wife... It would have made a life long separation between us, and I would have lost the love of the one woman in the world I worship of the only woman who has ever stirred love within me. (Act 11-139)

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.... Do you think she would have married me if she had known that the origin of my fortune is such as it is, the basis of my career such as it is, and that I had done a thing that I suppose most men would call shameful and dishonourable? (Act II-140)

Thus we find that Robert is an ordinary weak man, a prey to all worldly temptations, who sold his honesty and truth for the sake of earning a wonderful life and future ahead. Though we have the patriarchal world and though men rule the world yet it is quite obvious a fact that men have their existence only in relation to a woman. Men and women are the heart and soul that make the existence of life possible. Men may rule and dominate the entire world and may show their worth and supremacy to the womenfolk, yet the human fear and fickleness is as much a part of their existence as it is of a woman, though certain basic characteristic differences do exist.

Thus we find that though Arthur never confesses the truth to his wife, still she gets to know the reality through Mrs. Cheveley and thus the ensuing hot dispute between the husband and wife speaks volumes about a man-woman relationship:

LADY CHILTERN. Don't come near me. Don't touch me, I feel as if you had soiled me forever. Oh! What a mask you have been wearing all these years! (Act II-70)

And further,

LADY CHILTERN. And how I worshipped you! You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure noble, honest,

without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it and goodness more real because you lived. (Act II-71)

Thus here we have the intensity of love, devotion and attachment of a woman for a man. As has been tuned, a woman always loves and rather adores a man. A woman lives in a world built by and for men and so intensely she links her existence with her male counterpart (may be in the form of a father, husband or son) that perhaps she cannot even dare to imagine a life of her own without a male presence.

However parallel to a female psyche we also have a wonderful display of male psyche:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN..... 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... A man's love is like that. It is wider, larger, more human than a woman's.... You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now.... (Act II-71)

This we find that human beings have their own limitations and men and woman live their relationships in their own individual ways. However, under fit of rage, fury and utter helplessness, Gertrude writes Lord Goring a letter saying, "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." (Act III-75)

Though she just happens to write this letter in a fit of rage & considering Lord Goring as his confidante, she never actually visits his place. However, as the circumstances go, we find Mrs. Cheveley to be visiting Lord Goring the same night when Gertrude was supposed to be there and the wicked lady on getting that letter redirects it to Robert Chiltern. As Lord Goring shares this fact with Gertrude and insists Lady Chiltern to confess her mistake, she exclaims as follows:

LADY CHILTERN. "You want 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 ?..." (Act IV-111)



And further,

LADY CHILTERN. Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't! (Act III-111)

Thus we find that essentially there is no difference between the two partners. As human beings, both have their human weaknesses but none of the two had the courage to admit and confess the truth. People do strange things, at times, in their lives, in moods of strange anxiety by being a prey to varied temptations though they may have to feel repentant ever afterwards. However as Robert misunderstands the scenario and assumes the letter to be sent originally to him, a happy union between the two partners takes place. However as the circumstances go, Lady Chiltern in order to save Lord Goring's reputation and life discloses the truth about the letter to her husband. However, on this moment of utter crises, we find a wonderful loving and affectionate response the Lady's husband:

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN..... Had I fallen so low in your eyes that you thought that even for a moment I could have doubted you goodness? Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and sin can never touch you....(Act IV-123)

Similar intensity of love is quite apparent in Fitzgerald's *This side of Paradise* as Amory says to Clara Page, "I think that if I lost faith in you I'd Lose faith in God."<sup>1</sup>

Further in this context it will be appropriate to quote Don Ward:

"Love is capable of creating a unique world-a world, to be sure, that finite men too seldom enter, for it exists only in the moment when strong men and women spark uniqueness of life style, strive for freedom, and join themselves in the struggle for interpersonal dignity, integrity and worth."<sup>2</sup>

And thus with the restoration of everything in public and domestic life, we find the couple heading towards a wonderful existence together:

LADY CHILTERN. It is love, Robert. Love, and only love. For both of us a new life is beginning. (Act IV-125)

Thus we have a perfect couple in Robert and Gertrude Chiltern. Thus Gertrude can typically be viewed as the "nurturing woman who embodies love,

protectiveness and exercises considerable influence on the protagonist by being his emotional fulcrum against the nasty and brutish facts of life."<sup>3</sup> But somewhere penetrating into the deep recesses of this apparently wonderful relation one can realize that Gertrude is loved and respected because of her feminine traits, because of the genuineness of her behaviour, in other words because she has appropriated her existence to the male demands and is a better fit into this patriarchal world. She seems to have had appropriate training into this thing. Thus Simone de Beauvoir laments that,

"... since the patriarchal times, women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to man... this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics, but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men."<sup>4</sup>

Mary Daly terms sex role socialization,

"... a conditioning process which begins the moment we are born, and which is enforced by most institutions. Parents, friends, teachers, text books, authors and illustrators, advertisers, those who control the mass media, toy and cloth manufacturers, professionals such as doctors and psychologists-all contribute to the socialization process. This happens through dynamics that are largely calculated and unconscious, yet which reinforce the assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements of a sexually hierarchical society."<sup>5</sup>

Further moving to Lord Goring's and Gertrude's relation, we find them to be true well wishers and confidante. Lord Goring is the pivotal figure in the play, who perhaps is the most balanced personality in the entire multiplex of characters, meant to set everything in order by putting the things in the right perspective. He is a wonderful friend of Robert Chiltern, on intimate terms with Mabel Chiltern (Roberts' sister) whom he eventually marries and a great friend and confidante of Lady Chiltern.

Thus we find both of them discussing about Robert in Act II. As a great friend of Robert, we find Lord Goring indirectly preparing Lady Chiltern's mind to accept Robert's existence as an ordinary creature.



Lady Chiltern is full of exceptional praise and trust for her husband:

LADY CHILTERN. Robert is incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing. (Act II-54)

LORD GORING, Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing.

Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing. (Act II-54)

So intense is the love and friendship between the two characters that in her moods of utter despair and frustration, WE FIND Lady Chiltern writing a letter to Lord Goring, "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." (Act III-75), though she never visits his place.

Then further we find that it is Lord Goring only who keeps mum and accept even the false allegation charged upon him by Robert Chiltern just to Save Gertrude's honour and her relationship with Robert Chiltern. However, as goodness is always rewarded, the truth comes out as Lady Chiltern admits the real fact about the letter and thus Robert gives his consent for Lord Goring's and Mabel's marriage and it is Lord Goring only who finally persuades Gertrude Chiltern to prevail upon her husband to continue with his political career. Thus Lord Goring act at the central connecting force who, in the play, sets the things in order and links life to life and let the prosperity have to dawn.

Further we move on to the lover-beloved relationship between Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern. This relationship has not been explored in its full depth except for the fact that it is a budding love of two innocent hearts and through family links, they come into each other's contact.

Further we have another dimension of man-woman relationship in the form of Sir Robert's and Cheveley's relationship. In this relationship, we find the female dominating and pressing hard upon Sir Robert Chiltern. In the beginning of the play, we find this lady to have come from Vienna, especially to meet Sir Robert Chiltern, who is a great personality in the world of politics-a man known for his great moral character everywhere. Mrs. Cheveley actually wants him to support her in her mission by publicly supporting an otherwise fake scheme i.e. the Argentine scheme. And to make Sir Robert agree to her views, she blackmails him by threatening him that she will expose the deceitful origin of his career. Actually she, as an evidence carries a letter that

exclaims that Robert began his public career by selling to a stock exchange speculator a cabinet secret:

MRS. CHEVELEY.... I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too. (Act 1-24)

And further,

MRS. CHEVELEY... and now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends, to make our fortunes out of another! (Act1-24)

As Robert does not agree to her views, she threatens him:

MRS. CHEVELEY..... If it were known that as a youngman, secretary to a great and important minister, you sold a Cabinet secret for a large sum of money, and that was the origin of your wealth and career, you would be hounded out of public life, you would disappear completely....Years ago you did a clever, unscrupulous thing, It turned out a great success, you owe to it your fortune and position. And now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we all have to pay for what we do...." (Act I-26,27)

Thus by threats of this sort Mrs. Cheveley prevails upon Robert Chiltern to agree to her views. Though actually as the circumstances go, Sir Robert Chiltern never supports her scheme in the public. But as we explore deep into this relationship, we find that Mrs. Cheveley is a very wicked lady who leaves no stone unturned in disrupting and disturbing Robert's life. She discloses this secret to his wife and then when she finally discovers Gertrude's letter at Lord Goring's place, she forwards that letter to Robert to disrupt their family life.

Thus in this relationship we find a man and a woman to be in a relation where the wickedness done by one i.e. Robert Chiltern and the wicked nature of the other i.e. Mrs. Cheveley binds them together. We find Mrs. Cheveley to be harsh, business-like and blunt in her tone as she talks to Robert Chiltern. Thus she can be viewed as the "destructive woman who seems to exist solely to emasculate the protagonist, and cause him inconceivable agony through her chaotic and disruptive behavior."<sup>6</sup>



Thus in the play, we have an apparent depiction of a world where men and women seem to have equal rights for their existence, both can lead their lives the way they want and can assert their own individualities, through the patriarchal voices are quite audible beneath. However Wilde has hinted upon women's assertion of her liberation just as Salinger seems to assert in *Franny and Zooey*: "while sex is biological essentialism and cannot be wished away by women, gender being construct can be deconstructed and the binary opposition of male female can be abolished."<sup>7</sup>

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