

# A woman of no importance

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The purpose of this essay is to analyze, explain, inform, and suggest. An analysis of the various gender/sexuality, social status, religious, and governmental power struggles that existed in the play is presented. Explanation of various leadership styles is given.

Information on whether or not the analyzed power struggles were evident in England and America. Suggestions about why these two countries differed are given. The review begins with a discussion on the “ First Act”.

### First Act

In the “ First Act”, there was discussion on how some American states are as big as the entire countries of England and France. Also, conversation between Lady Caroline and Miss. Worsley (Hester) was about how Lady Caroline thought that Miss. Worsley had not right to be so particular over the people that others invited her to meet.

This was because Miss. Worsley was considered as a foreigner and Mrs. Allonby (the lady that Hester did not know if she would like or dislike) was considered to be royalty (Wilde 1893). As a result, this scene suggested that everyone in England is not treated equally. In fact, this inequality later manifested itself in a number of conversations between various characters in the play. However, unfair treatment between men and women in England is not the only conversation in the play.

The discussion shifted to how society perceived working individuals in both England and America. In England, workers never had the opportunity to become acquainted with high society. In fact, the high society members of

England were considered more important and respected than those who held jobs (Wilde 1893).

This provides an indication that England's power was one of a hierarchy where those at the top make all the decisions for the lower class levels to follow. In America, the play portrayed the people with the jobs as those who were highly respected in society (Wilde 1893). This showed a power shift to the working class because this class had purchasing, bargaining, and selling power to keep the economy moving forward.

At one point, Hester stated, " Mr. Arbuthnot has a beautiful nature!' ' He is so simple, so sincere.' ' He has one of the most beautiful natures I have ever come across.' '[I can say that] it is a privilege to meet him (sic)'" (Wilde 1893, First Act).

This statement is reminiscent of stereotyping. It indicates a power of persuasion that people are often able to portray themselves as having a good personality. However, in reality, they have faults and other faulty characteristics that would cause others to think of them in a different manner. Also, the fact that women had to conceal their feelings in England's society, made it difficult for people to know their true personalities.

Lady Caroline said, " It is not customary in England...for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex.' ' English women conceal their feelings till after they are married.' ' They [are allowed to] show them then'" (Wilde 1893, First Act). This passage suggests that England does not consider it lady-like for a woman to express interest in a man until after marriage.

In America, this would not have worked because women were able to have friendships with men they did not intend to marry. Furthermore, some American women engaged in sexual activities with men before marriage. The play portrayed the differences between how England women and American women are treated when it comes to this issue throughout each scene (Wilde 1893).

In another discussion, Lady Hunstanton expressed an interest in the fact that Lord Illingworth did not marry lady Kelso because she either came from a large family or her feet were too big (Wilde 1893, First Act). This suggests that royalty in England chose spouses based upon their appearance and whether or not they would fit into high society. In America, for the most part, people got married based upon the amount of love and respect they had for each other and not for the size of one's family or feet.

At some point, Kelvil entered into the discussions. The passage where he talked about “ I find that the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard” (Wilde 1893, First Act) is reflective of how many of America's working poor strive hard to achieve the American Dream.

However, at the same time, when Kelvil said, “ Women are always on the side of morality, public and private” (Wilde 1893, First Act) he is placing gender constraints on the political views of women. Yet, when Lady Hunstanton indicated, “...that dear Lord Illingworth doesn't value the moral qualities in women as much as he should” (Wilde 1893, First Act) she was placing limitations on the values and beliefs of high society England.

That is why when Lord Illingworth enters the scene he voiced his displeasure in being talked about behind his back (Wilde 1893). In America, people are talked about behind their backs all the time. This gives no party more power but often causes conflicts to occur that are hard to resolve. Rather than a win/win scenario occurring, these conflicts often create avoidance issues and that is a lose/lose scenario type. Perhaps this is why England women are expected to conceal their eagerness towards men.

While other conversations are noted, the discussions shifted to how American women should stay at home and stop traveling to England to find husbands (Wilde 1893). This shows a belief that England did not want its citizens marrying other cultures. At this point, the discussions are nearing politics.

Lady Hunstanton pointed out that no country has good politics. As the conversation continues, Kelvil said, “ You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor” (Wilde 1893, First Act). This suggests that the poor in England must struggle to survive due to little assistance from England’s government. Not too long after this, the conversation shifts to England’s East End and how it needs fixing. The problem is that slaves are amusing the higher society, according to Lord Illingworth (Wilde 1893, First Act).

Later on in the scene, conversation turned to debt. Lord Alfred talked about how everyone he knows is in debt (Wilde 1893). This is reflective of America’s society today. Many people do not get the things they want unless they can charge those items to credit cards and then pay them off later on. In the play, discussion was about how Americans were always well dressed

and did their shopping in Paris for clothes (Wilde 1893). So, even in early centuries, Americans went into debt to make sure they looked and felt good.

In fact, the fine apparel and good looks were not reflective of the plain look that was discussed in the play. Mrs. Allonby said, “ Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!” (Wilde 1893, First Act). This suggests that plain-looking women in England had low self-esteem issues. In America, it is possible for any type of woman to fear her husband will cheat on her.

Later on in the scene, Lord Illingworth indicated, “ One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation” (Wilde 1893, First Act). This means that anyone with a good reputation is highly respected even after death. It also suggests that everyone has something to live for and that is to have a good reputation when they die.

## Second Act

As the “ First Act” ended, the “ Second Act” came in with a strong discussion on a woman’s place in society. Mrs. Allonby made known her belief that women should stick by their husbands and not let them be alone. Lady Caroline talked about how a women’s place in society is to look after her husband. She also said that bachelors should be forced to marry within 12 months time. In addition, Lady Caroline made a reference to women as property and Mrs. Allonby pointed out that people should not be discussed in that type of manner (Wilde 1893).

In a sense, human property is slavery. Earlier in the play, it was discussed that this was a problem in England (Wilde 1893). However, America went through its own trials with slavery as well. Fortunately, when the right government came along, slavery was abolished in America and many African Americans have contributed greatly to the world. In particular, Martin Luther King, Jr. helped end slavery and for that, he has his own nationally observed holiday.

The discussion on men in the “ Second Act” is of major significance. This is because the type of man that each woman wanted was their Ideal Man. Lady Stutfield desired a man with a square chin. Mrs. Allonby told her that Ernest was that type of man. However, Lady Caroline reflected,

The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should talk about 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. He should encourage us to have caprices, and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says. (Wilde 1893, Second Act)

This type of man would possess charismatic leadership qualities. A charismatic leader is able to get others to follow him because of his personality.

On the other hand, Mrs. Allonby wanted another type of man. Mrs. Allonby’s Ideal Man “...should persistently compromise us in public and treat us with absolute respect when we are alone” (Wilde 1893, Second Act). A person who compromises creates a win/lose scenario. Basically, the thing that is

compromised works in the best interest of the one doing the compromising. In this sense, transformational leadership qualities are evident. This type of leader does whatever he can to get others to come on board with his ideas. In fact, transformational leadership exists in America. Remarkably, due to the effective leadership styles that both men and women have as reflective of Miss. Worsley's explanation, her conversations take on new meanings as they come to light in the play.

Miss. Worsley said, "...true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country" (Wilde 1893, Second Act). This implies that a high standard of ethics, humanitarian, and utilitarian exists. As a result, these men and women represent the universal leadership style. In this type of leadership, the leader is an active listener and among other qualities, looks out for the best interests of all parties that are involved.

Lady Hunstanton saw England as being too artificial when it comes to social class (Wilde 1893). This suggests that the upper class in England has their noses held high in the air and considers their class to be the best that England has to offer. In fact, Miss. Worsley (Hester) later supported this by stating, " Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish" (Wilde 1893, Second Act).

### Third Act

In the " Third Act", Lord Illingworth talked about how mothers are selfish people. Yet, this is a different type of selfishness than that discussed by Miss. Worsley. Lord Illingworth referred to the fact that mothers want to hold onto their children and not let them live their own lives. He also discussed the fact



that people want to live in the best society. Unfortunately, the only way for them to get there “...one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people—that is all!” (Wilde 1893, Third Act). Basically, this statement sums up how all three types of classes can coexist. For example, kings feed people, court jesters entertain, and the educated poor shock. One could say that this was the type of country that England was.

Lord Illingworth also talked about the history of women, the types of women, and religion in the “ Third Act”. Women were considered to be tricky. However, one can argue that the reason why women are considered by Lord Illingworth to be “ The tyranny of the weak over the strong” (Wilde 1893, Third Act) is because they need to be strong. Women are the ones who bear the pains of childbirth to bring leaders (kings, presidents, lords, etc.) into the world.

That is why Lord Illingworth’s depiction of women as either plain or coloured is wrong (Wilde 1893, Third Act). Women come from a variety of backgrounds and they are more than just white and black. Thus, another thing worth noting as discussed by Lord Illingworth in the “ Third Act” is religion. In terms of religion, Lord Illingworth said, “ The only difference between the spirit and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future” (Wilde 1893, Third Act).

In America, there are many different perceptions of what constitutes as a saint and a sinner. The notion that all individuals have a past, present, and future devalues Lord Illingworth’s statement. As a result, the discussion on the secret of life has new meaning. Mrs. Allonby said, “[It is]...never to have an emotion that is unbecoming” (Wilde 1893, Third Act). Kelvil said, “[It is]...

to resist temptation (Wilde 1893, Third Act). Lord Illingworth pointed out, “There is no secret of life” (Wilde 1893, Third Act). These statements suggest that philosophy was evident in England and that it was openly discussed by members of high society. Of course, this brings the play to the final act.

#### Fourth Act

In the “Fourth Act”, talk between Gerald, Mrs. Allonby and Lady Hunstanton was about how Gerald wanted to stay close to his mother, Mrs. Arbuthnot. Yet, Lady Hunstanton believed that by Gerald staying at home, he is being lazy (Wilde 1893). In American society, many people believe that the children should take care of their parents when the parents reach old age. Based upon the conversation between Gerald and Lady Hunstanton, some England citizens believed that a son wastes his life by trying to be near his mother (Wilde 1893).

As this conversation simmers down, Gerald strikes up a conversation with his mother and tried to get her to marry Lord Illingworth which happens to be Gerald’s father. This twist of events indicates that not everything goes well in England. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth were not married when they had Gerald. As a result, Mrs. Arbuthnot paid a high price and Lord Illingworth did not.

This is a sure sign that women were punished for deeds done in their bodies out of wedlock. Yet, the men were not (Wilde 1893). In America, the fathers are forced to pay child support. Thus, this implies that men held all the power in England whereas there were equal opportunities in America for both men and women.

Towards the end of the play, Mrs. Arbuthnot got into a heated conversation with Lord Illingworth over Gerald (their son) and marriage to him. Mrs. Arbuthnot told Lord Illingworth that he was not needed in Gerald's life and that she did not want to marry him.

In addition, Mrs. Arbuthnot warned Lord Illingworth to stay away from them. At this point, Lord Illingworth exchanged a few more words with Mrs. Arbuthnot and then leaves. Gerald and his wife-to-be, Miss. Worsley comes back into the house and asked who had been there. Mrs. Arbuthnot replied, "A man of no importance" (Wilde 1893, Fourth Act).

## Conclusion

Consequently, there seems to be a shift in the power struggle between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot. In the past, Lord Illingworth had gotten the best of Mrs. Arbuthnot through a number of ways, including not marrying her and not supporting their child. However, Mrs. Arbuthnot finally stood up for herself and spoke her mind. Lord Illingworth suggested that she would not be able to stay in England like that. However, Mrs. Arbuthnot told him that they did not plan on staying there anyway. As a result, this suggests that strong-minded England women had to find other countries to leave in order to both have and enjoy the freedoms that they deserved.

## Reference

Wilde, Oscar. A Woman of No Importance. 1893. Emotional Literacy Education and Mark Zimmerman. 21 May 2007