Compassion and forgiveness: wilde’s insincerity

In ‘ An Ideal Husband’ Wilde effectively portrays compassion and forgiveness as very important qualities. He emphasizes how these characteristics can save relationships, proving that Robert and Lady Chiltern can recover their marriage. Robert and Lord Goring urge Gertrude to reconcile with her husband, imploring her to disregard her moral principles in order to preserve a happy marital life, a highly ironic demand given that they are unable to provide forgiveness themselves.

Wilde presents Lord Goring as a character who understands the importance of compassion and forgiveness, especially when placed in the context of marriage. In Act 3 he reassures Robert Chiltern, stating ‘ your wife will forgive you … She loves you, Robert. Why should she not forgive?’. This comment demonstrates Goring’s belief that love and forgiveness are inseparable from one another, a duality which he views as crucial for a happy and sustainable marriage. Lord Goring’s faith in Gertrude’s capacity to forgive is expressed through his use of the word ‘ will’, a modal verb which creates a sense of certainty in Goring’s tone. Indeed, Lord Goring views forgiveness as essential to the development of men within society, attributing their growth to womankind’s compassion and clemency towards their husbands. He claims that ‘ women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission.’ This declaration outlines how women were viewed by men in the patriarch of Victorian society. Their role was to support their husbands, remaining submissive and meek, trapped in a chauvinistic culture which encouraged the oppression of women’s personal opinions. This is emphasized through the alliteration of ‘ pardon’ and ‘ punishment’, two

concepts which are juxtaposed in Lord Goring’s speech, thereby condemning women who actively criticise their husbands’ moral imperfections. Certainly, Goring recognizes that forgiveness is essential for our acknowledgement of universal human imperfection, a message which he forces onto Lady Chiltern. However, despite Goring’s appraisal of forgiveness, he is unable to pardon Mrs. Cheveley of her selfish actions. In Act 3 he confronts her saying, ‘ I cannot forgive you. That was horrible. For that there can be no forgiveness.’ The repetition of ‘ forgive’ highlights Goring’s hypocritical stance, because, although he promotes notions of reconciliation and absolution, he is unable to grant them himself. His response also seems to indicate that there is a hierarchy of moral wrongdoings, in which some actions are more worthy of forgiveness than others.

While Lord Goring views Lady Chiltern’s reluctance to forgive as a betrayal of her duty as a woman, Robert Chiltern regards his wife’s unyielding moral outlook as unfair. At the end of Act 2 he appears to lose patience with Gertrude, claiming ‘ Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon.’ Robert’s desperate tone is highlighted by the use of short clauses which speeds up the pace of his fraught speech. He seems to view Lady Chiltern’s rigid stance as an anomaly to marriage and love itself, her horror causing him to become angry and rash. His condemnation of Gertrude’s suffocating morality is further enhanced in Act 3 when he describes how ‘ she stands apart as good women do – pitiless in her perfection – cold and stern and without mercy.’ This comment suggests that Robert views his wife as callous and cruel in her unforgiving attitude. The use of alliteration and tricolon accentuates the sense that Robert views

Gertrude’s reaction as unjust. He also aligns her lack of forgiveness with very negative qualities, forging the feeling that he has overlooked her moral principles in his own personal distress. Yet, despite his anguish, Robert seems to have instinctively known that his wife would find it difficult to feel compassion towards him once she discovered his wrongdoings, even claiming that it ‘ would kill her love’ for him’. His use of emotive language implies that he foreshadowed a brutal split in their relationship once the truth emerged. This makes his outrage at Gertrude’s reaction seem false as he was already anticipating her lack of forgiveness and sympathy.

Lady Chiltern may initially refuse to pardon Robert of his morally dubious actions, yet by the play’s conclusion she manages to overcome her moral inflexibility and forgive him. In Act 2 Lord Goring recognizes Gertrude’s firm moral nature and tries to soften her rigid rules on morality, hoping that this persuasion will spare Robert from her disappointment. He tells her that he has ‘ sometimes thought that … perhaps you are a little too hard in some of your views on life.’ The ellipsis in this line throws weight onto Goring’s careful approach, yet his message is still clear, emphasizing how Lady Chiltern is recognized as unbendingly honorable and moral. However, Gertrude seems to have taken heed of Goring’s advice by Act 4, exclaiming ‘ I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now.’ Through this comment Lady Chiltern reveals the transformation she had undergone, highlighting how she will no longer idealize men. However, her change in opinion is worrying as she seems to have been indoctrinated by Lord Goring’s view that a woman’s duty is to forgive and empathize with their

husbands, a view which feeds the misogynistic tendencies of the Victorian society.

Overall, despite Wilde’s attempts to stress the importance of forgiveness and compassion, his message falls short. Wilde seems to suggest that men are exempt from granting their pardon, even though they advocate this quality in women. This hypocritical view is encapsulated in Lord Goring who encourages Lady Chiltern to forgive her husband, while simultaneously refusing to forgive Mrs Cheveley. Robert Chiltern anticipates his wife’s lack of sympathy, yet still finds her treatment unfair, accusing her of being heartless and unfeeling. Lady Chiltern herself upholds her moral values until Lord Goring persuades her to forgive Robert, creating the feeling that forgiveness and compassion can change a person’s character. In the end, forgiveness saves Robert and Gertrude’s marriage, even if this happiness is forged at the cost of Lady Chiltern’s autonomy.