

# Masculine and feminine identity in an ideal husband



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Identity is fluid. Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (first performed 1895), affirms this concept. The play asserts the notion that we, as humans, carve our own identity through conscious decision. In doing so, Wilde interrogates the idea of identity rigidity – that human beings are born with certain characteristics, that these are static, and create our character. Wilde also interrogates Victorian notions of gender identity. He uproots traditional concepts surrounding masculinity, and disparages the development of the 'new woman' during the late 19th century. He deconstructs Victorian idealised notions of the wife and husband, forwarding a new, imperfect identity for both.

Wilde, disputing Victorian notions of latent identity, depicts identity as mutable; shaped by human decision. This is evident through an examination of the characterisation of Lord Goring – the dandified bachelor of *An Ideal Husband*. He is said to be 'clever', 'but he would not like to be thought so', as well as 'a flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic'. These directives showing him as actively aware of how others perceive him, implying that he attempts to shape this perception. Lord Goring repeatedly downplays his intelligence, stating that he 'knows nothing of practical life' to Gertrude Chiltern, and telling Sir Robert to "never mind what I say". However, he is then described as 'showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy'. Through his characterisation, it is evident that Lord Goring actively shapes his identity, however false. *An Ideal Husband's* interrogation of fixed identity is further emphasised by the character of Mrs Cheveley, the villainess of the play, as a shaper of her own identity. Although she 'looks rather like an orchid' and is 'in all her movements extremely

graceful', Wilde makes it clear that this is a façade she has chosen to present. She refers to 'being natural' as "such a very difficult pose to keep up". Even being 'natural' is a pose, showing her active creation of an identity. In Act Three, Mrs Cheveley's true nature is revealed, when 'a mask has fallen from her' and 'she is, for the moment, dreadful to look at'. Mrs Cheveley is described in stage direction as 'a work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools', denoting the idea that an 'artist' - the person themselves - has created their own identity. This idea is epitomised in Lady Markby's statement that "Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else". Identity is therefore represented as fluid, and interrogated as unchanging, by *An Ideal Husband*.

Wilde redefines set gendered identities, primarily through the contrast of characters Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern. Chiltern is initially couched in masculine terms with a 'firmly chiselled mouth and chin' and 'dark-haired and dark-eyed' - the stereotypical 'hero' description. However, he is then repeatedly depicted 'in a state of great mental excitement and distress' uttering melodramatic statements such as 'Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!' peppered with exclamations and repetition. This emotionality has typically been a female bastion. Lord Goring, on the other hand, is described in feminine terms - wearing 'all the delicate fopperies of fashion'. However his dialogue is more 'masculine' - concise and witty, undercutting Sir Robert's histrionics. For example, in the beginning of the second act, Sir Robert's lengthy verses alternate with Lord Goring's short statements such as 'Personally I have a great admiration for stupidity. It is a

sort of fellow feeling I suppose'. This juxtaposition reverses gender expectations, redefining the masculine identity.

Furthermore, the plays positive depiction of Lord Goring represents the 'dandy' as a valid male identity. The fringe aesthetic movement, of which Wilde was a key member, was frequently satirised by the conventional press, therefore Wilde interrogates Victorian gender identity expectations. The audience is endeared to Lord Goring through his comic dialogue—for example Lord Goring's insistence in Act Three that his buttonhole is 'too trivial' and that it makes him look 'a little too old', combined with the Butler Phipps' 'yes, my lord' replies is highly amusing. He also states whilst 'looking at himself in the glass' that "My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don't know". To an audience watching the play, this image is extremely funny. Lord Goring is the source of many paradoxical statements, such as the famous 'I love talking about nothing, father. It's the only thing I know anything about'. Therefore, through Wilde's use of comedy, he endears us as audiences to the character of Lord Goring. Wilde's humour makes the 'dandy' as an identity more palatable for a Victorian audience, thereby interrogating the traditional powerful 'hero' identity of men.

Although Wilde is progressive in this respect, he is conservative in his interrogation of the 'New Woman' identity, foregrounded through the character of Lady Chiltern. Lady Chiltern ventures into the public sphere, involving herself with the Women's Liberal Association and issues such as "Factory Acts, the Parliamentary franchise" and championing "the higher Education of women". However, Wilde debunks this blossoming Victorian women identity. In the end of the play,. Lady Chiltern in dialogue disturbingly

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(for a modern audience) parrots Lord Goring's statement that 'a man's life is of more value than a woman's', stating that "how women help the world" is through forgiving their men. The curtain closes upon the image of Lady Gertrude 'leaning over the back of the chair' her husband, Sir Robert, is seated upon - an image which could be interpreted as Lady Chiltern's relegation to the role of supporter of her husband. It implies that Lady Chiltern will no longer attempt to influence her husband in the public sphere due to the havoc this has caused, ending on a resoundingly conservative note lamenting the growing political influence and 'new woman' identity.

Some may point to Mrs Cheveley, the villainess of the play, as evidence of Wilde's encouragement of a strong female identity. Initially, Mrs Cheveley is characterised as independent- manipulating the male characters when she 'drops her fan' and Sir Robert is required to pick it up for her. She is depicted as powerful as seen in her position in Act One where she is 'leaning back on the sofa' in languid arrogance, as well as her militaristic dialogue where she refers to the 'war' she is winning against her 'enemy', Sir Robert in the 'game of politics' However, Mrs Cheveley is ultimately punished by Wilde, as a result of her attempts to exert agency in the 'man's world' of politics. After the failure of her manipulations, she is silenced for the entirety of Act Four, implying her banishment from polite society, and evincing Wilde's interrogation of the 'new woman' identity of women engaged in political life.

The Victorian era was infamous for its moral absolutes, one aspect of which was the idealisation of the 'wife' and 'husband' identity - an idealisation Wilde interrogates through his forwarding of a new, imperfect identity. Lady Chiltern in the play repeatedly makes idealised statements of her husband  
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such as that “ Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing”, whilst the audience is well aware that this was not the case due to his sale of a Cabinet secret for great personal gain. Wilde’s use of dramatic irony therefore portrays Lady Gertrude as naïve, ridiculing these repeated statements. She then undergoes a character development at the hands of Wilde, ‘ reforming’ in the end to forgive her husband, and blaming herself for “ setting him up too high”, affirming the idea that we should not expect our partners to be perfect in the resolution. This idea is epitomised in Mabel Chiltern’s statement at the end of the play that she would not like “ an ideal husband”, stating that “ he can be what he chooses” and that all she wants to be is “ a real wife”. The resolution of the play is the message the play wishes to leave, and it is clear that Wilde is advocating for an ‘ imperfect’ identity in marriage, with acceptance and acknowledgement of faults forming our perception of our partner – their identity.