

PORTRAYAL OF VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN OSCAR WILDE'S PLAYS

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Zobrazenie viktoriánskej spoločnosti v hrách Oscara Wildea

Abstrakt

Táto práca sa zaoberá spôsobom, akým Oscar Wilde zobrazuje vo svojich komédiách viktoriánsku spoločnosť. Hlavným cieľom tejto práce bolo analyzovať jednotlivé prvky spoločnosti viktoriánskej éry v jeho štyroch komédiách, ktorými sú *Vejár lady Windermerovej*, *Bezvýznamná žena*, *Ideálny manžel* a *Aké dôležité je mať Filipa*. Práca je rozdelená do štyroch kapitol, pričom prvá kapitola je venovaná samotnému autorovi komédií a tri ďalšie sa zaoberajú jednotlivými znakmi viktoriánskej spoločnosti v dielach Oscara Wildea. V prvej kapitole sú stručne spomenuté základné informácie o študentských časoch autora a o jeho osobnom i pracovnom živote, ktoré sú dôležité pre lepšie pochopenie niektorých prvkov jeho komédií, keďže jeho diela sú často odrazom jeho života. V ďalšej kapitole je analyzovaný jeden z najčastejších znakov Wildeových komédií, ktorým je lož. Autor v každej zo svojich komédií vykresľuje spoločnosť, ktorá je plná lží rôzneho druhu, pričom v diele *Aké dôležité je mať Filipa* sa k bežným lžiam pridáva i žitie tajného či dvojitého života, pre ktorý má autor i pomenovanie – *bunburovanie*. Tretia kapitola je venovaná spôsobu, akým Oscar Wilde opisuje mužov viktoriánskej éry, pričom typický muž, ktorý sa vyskytuje v každej Wildeovej komédii, ale aj v románe *Portrét Doriana Graya*, je *dandy* – elegantný, sofistikovaný a výborne oblečený muž s vybranými spôsobmi. V tejto kapitole je popísaný aj vzťah mužov k ženám vo viktoriánskom období, pričom sa tu často stretávame s nerešpektovaním a so zlým zaobchádzaním so ženami. V poslednej časti tretej kapitoly sa zameriavame na spoločné znaky medzi autorom a jeho mužskými postavami, keďže autor často prenášal svoje životné skúsenosti do svojich diel a postáv. Posledná kapitola sa zaoberá viktoriánskymi ženami v komédiách Oscara Wildea, pričom sa tu stretávame s dvoma odlišnými typmi žien. Na jednej strane sú tu *padlé ženy*, teda ženy, ktoré mali sexuálny pomer s mužom, ktorý nie je ich manželom, alebo ženy s neznámou, často pravdepodobne s temnou minulosťou. Na strane druhej sú ženy *nevinné* či dokonca *obete*, ktoré nemohli zvrátiť svoju minulosť a nie sú zodpovedné za niektoré vzniknuté situácie v ich živote. Oscara Wildea často inšpirovali aj rôzne udalosti doby, v ktorej žil, akým bol napríklad aj fenomén „*Novej ženy*“, keď ženy opúšťali svoje tradičné postavenie v spoločnosti a niektoré požadovali slobodu v obliekaní i v názoroch. Wilde často popisoval spoločnosť viktoriánskej éry ako spoločnosť plnú lží, podvodov a falošných ľudí, kde muži vôbec nerešpektovali ženy a nepovažovali ich za seberovné. Autor sa vysmieval ženám, ktoré sa snažili odpútať od svojich typických ženských rol a zveličoval situácie, v ktorých boli ženy dominantnejšie ako to bolo zvyčajné.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde is a well-known writer of the Victorian Era. He is famous for his critical works, essays, plays, as well as fairy tales. He wrote one widely known novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. His greatest works are his social comedies, in which he criticises the society and describes it with a significant portion of wit, irony and parody. In this thesis we would like to introduce four Wilde's plays which are dealing with the social situation of the Victorian period.

The main aim of this thesis is to study the ways of how is Victorian society described. This thesis is divided into four chapters; whereas the first one describes Wilde's life and works and the other three parts deals with lying in his plays and Wilde's depiction of men and women. Lies and leading a secret life belong to the most frequent topics of Wilde's plays. Sometimes they are obvious lies and another time they are implicit or not that clear. Wilde's depiction of men and women is quite similar. Each of the plays includes some gentleman and women are either fallen or innocent. One of the chapters deals with the similarity of Oscar Wilde with his male characters.

1 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October, 1854 in Dublin as the second son of oculist and ear-surgeon Sir William Wilde, and Jane Francesca Elgee, Lady Wilde, who wrote under the name 'Speranza'. He studied at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and then he continued his studies at Trinity College in Dublin, where he won many prizes, including the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. In October 1874 he entered Magdalen College in Oxford with a scholarship. In the year of 1878 he won the Newdigate Prize with his poem *Ravenna*, and in the same year he also completed his degree. (Raby, 2004) After ending his studies he moved to London, where he soon established himself as a writer and leader of a new aesthetic movement which adopted the slogan "art for art's sake". (Loy, 2001)

Wilde's first play *Vera; or the Nihilists*, was printed privately in 1880 and in the year after the play was scheduled for performance at the Adelphi Theatre but it was withdrawn. He got engaged to Constance Lloyd in 1883 and he got married in 1884 in London. His first son, Cyril was born year after Oscar and Constance got married. In the same year Wilde started to be very active in journalism. His second son, Vyvyan was born exactly year after Cyril's birth. In 1887 Wilde accepted the editorship of the *Woman's World* and in the following years began his most creative period, he wrote *The Happy Prince* and his first and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which was published in *Lippincott's Magazine*. In last months of 1891 Wilde visited Paris where he wrote *Salomé* which was first published in French and a year later in English. (Raby, 1997) In the following years Oscar Wilde was writing his famous social comedies, in which he satirized the hypocrisy of social class, marriage, the desire for respectability, and many other issues. (Loy, 2001) *Lady Windermere's Fan* had its premiere on 20 February in 1893 at the St. James's Theatre and was published in November, 1893. In August, 1892 Wilde was already working on another play named *A Woman of No Importance* which had its opening night at the Theatre Royal in April, 1893. Oscar Wilde's most famous play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written in 1894 and had its premiere on Valentine's Day in 1895 at the St. James's Theatre. (Raby, 1997)

Oscar Wilde is well-known for his colourful life. He was hiding his homosexuality as married man for a long time. But when the spring of 1895 came, he was accused of homosexuality and then considered a serious criminal offense by the Marquis of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom Wilde had a relationship several years earlier. Wilde was arrested on 5 April, 1895 and imprisoned for two years of hard labour in prison. He spent most of his imprisonment at Reading Gaol. After he was released from prison he left Britain and lived abroad until his death. Wilde was influenced by the hard time and humiliation he suffered in jail, so he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* to advocate prison reform in Britain. (Loy, 2001) *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published in February 1898, and a year later, in 1899 his two plays – *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* were published. At the end of his life Wilde was accepted into the Roman Catholic Church and he died in Paris on 30 November, 1900. (Raby, 1997)

2 Lies and double-life in Wilde's social comedies

Lying is such a common feature in Wilde's plays that it is certain that there is some deeper meaning of it or a reason for it. None of the characters in Wilde's comedies is completely honest. For example, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff are not just lying but they are also living double-lives. Jack made up his fake wicked brother Ernest to have an excuse to leave the country and go to London whenever he wants, and Algernon, on the other hand, has a fictional sick friend named Bunbury, who he said he was visiting when he wanted to leave the town. Here comes the question if what Wilde called 'Bunburying' is actually an expression for his secret life as a homosexual. These two characters are not the only ones who lie. Lying can be found in every social comedy written by Oscar Wilde, and the reason for that seems to be the fact that no society (today or past) can function without lying. Some people lie because they want to protect somebody, the others lie because of some pleasure they have to hide, and the others just have to lie in order to preserve their social status. In the following subchapters I am going to look closer at the lies in Wilde's plays and also their reasons.

2.1 Lying in *Lady Windermere's Fan*

In his play Wilde came with the variation of what seemed to be a traditional plot – the secret which would be revealed in the last act, but in this case the truth is never discovered. Lady Windermere never knows who Mrs. Erlynne actually is, that she is her mother. Lord Windermere never discovers that his wife was ready to leave him and runaway with Lord Darlington. (Raby, 1997) In Wilde's other comedies, however, the truth is discovered. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* the truth would destroy the ideal bubble – the happy married couple and their social status. If Lord Windermere knew his wife was ready to abandon him, the happy marriage would probably break up.

Some of the Wilde's characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan* do not lie directly. For example, when Lord Windermere begs Mrs. Erlynne to not to tell the truth she responds with words: "It is my secret, it is not yours. If I make up my mind to tell her, and I think I will, I shall tell her before I leave the house - if not, I shall never tell her." So even if she claims she will probably tell the truth, she decides not to. She takes the truth with herself so she lies implicitly. She does not tell lies but the truth is never discovered and Lady Windermere remains to live in a lie that she has no mother. Mrs. Erlynne has some reasons why she never told the truth. Although she says Mr. Windermere that she has no intention to be a mother or that she claims to be younger than she really is, she might have another reason. She probably realizes the fact that it would bring the shame on her daughter and she wants to protect her even though she does not admit it.

2.2 Lying in *The Woman of No Importance*

While *Lady Windermere's Fan* centres on a woman who abandons her husband and child, *The Woman of No Importance* focuses on a father, Lord Illingworth, who seduces a young woman and does not want to marry her and be the father of the child so he leaves her, and now he tries to win his son Gerald back. (Raby, 1997) The two plays are very similar – there are mothers, fallen women, who lie to their children. In *The Woman of No Importance* Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose son is a bastard or better said illegitimate child, is just trying to protect her son from the public disgrace. It was a real shame in Victorian era and yet, it must have happened quite often because it occurs in many other plays or works. In this case, what is contrary to *Lady Windermere's Fan* the truth is discovered in order to avoid tragedy or even murder, when Gerald is about to attack Lord Illingworth. Even the last sentence of the play is a lie when Mrs. Arbuthnot claims that the glove belongs to a man of no importance but in fact it belongs to Gerald's father: "Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance." This play, as it began with a lie, it also ends with a lie. The motive is the same - mother lies to protect her son, and again, it shows the way the society works. The society is just a web of lies, whether it is from mercy or anger, which Oscar Wilde keeps unchanged.

2.3 Lying in *An Ideal Husband*

While in previous two plays are mothers who lie to their children, in *An Ideal Husband* are characters that lie each other. It is another play, where lying is a very common feature. But in this play lies are between men and women. Sir Chiltern is lying his wife about how he acquired his property. And

when finally comes to the truth, Lady Chiltern prefers or begs for a lie: “*You sold a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonour! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!*” She cannot live with the fact that her husband is not an ideal husband like she thought before. Here also comes Wilde’s parody of women who think they have perfect husbands. He is mocking them with the title *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde knows there is no such thing as an ideal man. The only reason why women think they have an impeccable husband is that they do not know the whole simple truth about them. It also proves that society cannot exist without lies and frauds.

Lying about property is not the only lie of the play. Later in *An Ideal Husband* are Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring instantly ready to lie to sir Chiltern about the letter. The reason is protection, but there is the question whether they are protecting Sir Robert Chiltern or themselves. If they told the truth it would be quite hard to explain the letter. But this instant lie shows the willingness of people of Victorian society to lie without consideration before. Wilde shows that these times were full of lies and the truth is he would be absolutely right about it even today.

2.4 Lying and double-life in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

What makes Wilde’s last social comedy special is that almost everybody lie in the play. In previous plays were either mothers that lie to their children or lies between different genders. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* are also lies between the same sexes. For example, when Cecily and Gwendolen argue about which one of them is engaged to Ernest, Cecily lies to Gwendolen about the newspaper announcement in a local paper: “*Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.*” Jack also laps to the web of lies about his cigarette case when talking to Algy. All lies in the play lead to the fact that society was (or still is) a tissue of lies and cannot function without them. Algernon is absolutely right to say that “*the truth is rarely pure and never simple*”, and Jack develops this point by saying: “*My dear fellow, the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice sweet refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!*” It is about protecting young women from the horrible truths of life but it is actually them who The idea is to protect girls from the brutal facts of life but it is actually young women who wants to speak honest and open about things and life. (Kiberd, 1997)

It is not just lying which accompanies the play but there is also a new element – living secret lives or double-lives. “For men, life in the public sphere involved duty, service, and pursuit of a profession. The private sphere, usually presided over by women, provided men with a domestic haven, a retreat from public duties, in the form of a peaceful home and, ideally, a loving marriage. The separation between public and private life could take on sinister implications, however—especially for men, who possessed more freedom and autonomy than their wives. It was entirely possible for an otherwise respectable middle-class husband to lead a life of promiscuity and depravity, of which his wife might be kept completely unaware.” (Loy, 2001, p. 198) This secret life is also simply explained by Jack: “*Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.*” Jack makes up his brother Earnest who always gets himself into some sort of trouble to have an excuse to go to London anytime he wants. Jack’s friend Algernon has his sick friend Bunbury who he “visits” whenever he wants to leave the city or to avoid family dinners. In this double-life of Wilde’s characters is a hidden meaning. Wilde also led double-life when he was married. He had to hide the fact that he is a homosexual. He also thought that this secret life is a necessary evil in society and that number people does that.

3 Men in Wilde’s social comedies

Wilde depicts men in his plays quite similarly. Whether it is Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or it is charming Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, mean Lord Illingworth in the play *A Woman of No Importance* or Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, they all have something in common. They are charming, well-dressed gentlemen who care about their clothes. They are dandies like Oscar Wilde was himself. All of them are single men, who enjoy their lives as bachelors, although they all wish to be married. Through their opinions Wilde expresses his attitudes towards life and his views on the women and their social status in the Victorian society. In the following sections I

will be describing Wilde's dandies and his resemblance to his characters, as well as their opinions on women.

3.1 Dandies

The term "dandy", at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was applied to foppish men largely concerned with fine clothes and polished manners. The new dandy of the late Victorian period was a sophisticated man who worships town and the artificial, grace and elegance. (Loy, 2001) Every social comedy written by Oscar Wilde contains some sort of dandy. It is because he was also a dandy and he gave every dandy character a piece of himself. Sometimes it was just a well dressed man, sometimes it was the wit which they had in common. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* it is Lord Darlington who is very charming and well-dressed young gentleman, secretly in love with Lady Windermere. He has no trouble to offer her an escape plan in order to be with her, even though she is married.

"In *A Woman of No Importance* Wilde introduces dandies who dominate by wit and assurance, who match each other in their manipulation of words, and who define the fashionable and the modern." (Raby, 1997, pp. 151-152) Wilde even claims with the words of Lord Illingworth that "*The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule.*" The fact that Lord Illingworth does not get what he wants and he gets slapped with his own glove by a woman who calls him at the end of the play "*a man of no importance*", says that Oscar Wilde as a dandy himself knew that the future does not actually belongs to dandies at all.

Oscar Wilde described Lord Goring from *An Ideal Husband* as "*a flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world.*" This gives an impression that Wilde may have been describing himself. On the other hand, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde depicts two dandies – Jack and Algernon, who are both living secret lives and also lie a lot. They are probably the most similar to Oscar Wilde. Ronald Knowles (2011, p. 49) says that "his dandy surrogates, Algernon and Jack, achieve a relative carnival freedom from social restraint, yet cannot, like Wilde himself, escape the overriding necessity of the importance of being gentlemen".

3.2 Opinions on women

The most of Wilde's male characters do not see women as equal or respect them. Some of them treats or treated women badly. For example, in past Lord Illingworth refused to marry the pregnant mother of his child. He is a charming but wicked gentleman who seduces women. He has no respect for women and also tries to seduce the young American girl Hester. He claims that there are "*only two kinds (of women) in society: the plain and the coloured*", what just proves the fact that he does not respect them at all. He makes fun of them and mocking them.

The Victorian era was not the period of time when the women were treated equally as men. This fact also reflects in Wilde's comedies. Women were not considered to be as smart as men like he depicts it in *An Ideal Husband* with the words of Lord Caversham: "*No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex.*" The change should come with the concept of the "New Woman" which I will be dealing with in the fourth chapter.

Oscar Wilde had never seen any possible relationship other than marriage, what is proved in *Lady Windermere's Fan* when Lord Darlington claims that "*between men and women there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship, love, but no friendship.*" Even though he offered friendship to Lady Windermere first, when she comes to him as a friend he says it is not possible. This gives the impression that there was no friendship between men and women in Victorian Era other than marriage or love affair.

3.3 Oscar Wilde as a character in his plays

Wilde simultaneously engaged with and mocked the forms and rules of society. His stance as a dandy, a performer and (as an Irishman) an outsider gave him a particular use for the machinery and conventions both of the social world and of the society drama of the theatre. (Jackson, 1997) Speaking about *The Importance of Being Earnest*, some critiques argue whether there are coded references to the homosexual double life of Wilde or not. The most questions came with all this "Bunburying" of

Algernon but on the other hand, he falls in love with a woman in the end of the play. Despite this fact, some critiques insist that the play has homosexual signs. The reason for that is the relationship with a man called Bunbury when living a secret life, which is exactly how Oscar Wilde had to live his life – as a married homosexual he had to lead a secret life, too. The other reason is that “the verb ‘bunburying’ contains a fairly explicit pun on anal intercourse, and the multivalence of Ernest allows the word to stand for Jack’s proper name, a patronym, an alias, and imaginary lover, and as a code-word for homosexual desire itself: since *Love in Earnest* (1892) titled a volume of Uranian poetry by John Gambriel Nicholson, as Bristov notes, and in 1896 Marc-André Raffalovich published a study of homosexuality titled *Uranisme et Unisexualité*.” (Bristov, In: Mendelssohn, 2007, p. 181) Algernon said that “*one has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that,*” and it is very possible that Wilde meant himself by that. He wanted the right to ‘bunbury’ any time he wanted. He did not want to hide the fact that he is a homosexual. The irony is that just a few weeks after the premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest* he was imprisoned and convicted of homosexuality, so he did not have to hide it anymore. That is also the reason why is this Wilde’s play frequently connected with homosexuality.

Wilde’s arrestment is not the only ironic thing connected with his plays. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Jack said about his fake brother Ernest that “*he seemed to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris*” and the comic thing is that Oscar Wilde actually is buried in Paris. (Knowles, 2011) Three days before he died there, Wilde was asked about his life in London and he replied with words of Algernon Moncrieff, paradoxical as always, when he recycled a well-turned phrase: “*Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple.*” (Holland, 1997)

4 Women in Wilde’s social comedies

Wilde’s female characters are often depicted as strong and the plot centres around them in his social plays. (Watkin, 2010) “In Wilde’s time, the rituals of courtship and marriage were complicated by a social phenomenon: the rise of the “New Woman.” The term was mostly applied to a vanguard of middle- to upper-class women of the 1880s and 1890s who increasingly forsook the traditional female role of self-effacing wife and mother and sought lives beyond the domestic sphere. In her most extreme form, the New Woman sought to claim the same freedoms of thought, speech, and dress that men had possessed for generations. Many in the mainstream regarded her with alarm and disdain—in the popular press, she was derided, ridiculed, and exhorted to return to hearth and home.” (Loy, 2001, p. 195) In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde is describing comic aspect of the potential situation of how would it look like if the women were more dominant or aggressive somehow. Gwendolen and Cecily are not representatives of the New Woman but they are more aggressive than for example Lady Windermere or Lady Chiltern. They both require the proposal to be exactly as they planned it.

Oscar Wilde is also writing about the fallen women or women with some sort of past that changed them. The typical example of the fallen woman is for instance Mrs. Arbuthnot because of her affair. On the other hand, there are also innocent women in Wilde’s plays which have no darkness in their past lives, like Hester Worsley. Those are the two main topics that will be developed in the following subchapters.

4.1 The fallen women and women with past

Wilde in his comedies is also writing about the fallen women. The fallen woman is a term used in the past to describe a woman who had a sexual relationship with a man who was not her husband. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* it is Mrs. Erlynne. She left her husband and her daughter years ago and the history seems to be repeating when her daughter, Lady Windermere is doing the same thing. “*Oh, how terrible! The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! and how bitterly I have been punished for it!*” Mrs. Erlynne decides to stop the tragedy and helps her daughter. With this act she rectifies her reputation in reader’s eyes. She is also a woman with mysterious past, because nobody knows who she is and where she comes from.

In *A Woman of No Importance* it is Mrs. Arbuthnot who is a fallen woman. She has an illegitimate son Gerald. She does not want to tell the truth to her son about his father because it would bring the

shame to both of them. In Victorian Era it was something unthinkable and shameful for woman to have a sexual relationship with a man that is not her husband. These women were damned. The irony is that the fallen women are often portrayed in the Victorian literature (in the works of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Oscar Wilde and others) which gives the impression that it was not completely unusual, even though it was considered to be wrong.

On the other hand, in *An Ideal Husband* is Mrs. Chevely who is a woman with unknown past for a reader. She is not a fallen woman but some sort of female dandy that is well-dressed and has exquisite manners. She comes from abroad and knows Robert's secret. It is strange that she knows people's secrets but nobody knows hers. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde is mocking his older plays, and he makes fun of fallen women like Mrs. Erlynne or Mrs. Arbuthnot. When Jack thinks he found his long lost mother he is so full of joy that he is ready to forgive his mother her straying from the path of virtue, but Miss Prism is offended when Jack thinks she has given a birth to an illegitimate child. (Niederhoff, 2011) Miss Prism as a representative of the older generation is disgusted with the idea of having an illegitimate child but Jack, on the other hand is happy that he found his mother. The usual reaction should be shame or disgrace and not joy. These Jack's words may actually imply that the situation of fallen women might have been changing: "*Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you.*" The other possibility is that Wilde wants to be treated as he writes. He wants to be forgiven his acts of folly, his homosexual affairs.

4.2 Innocent women

The fallen woman is not the only type of a woman in Wilde's plays. Oscar Wilde also describes innocent women. Women who does nothing wrong or who could not change their past situations. "Rachel Arbuthnot, Wilde's woman of no importance, is both a woman with a past, an innocent victim, and the centre of goodness and moral truth within the play." (Raby, 1997, p. 151) Even though she is a fallen woman it is not entirely her fault since she was rejected by a man with whom she was pregnant. However, the perfect example of an innocent woman in *A Woman of No Importance* is Hester Worsley. She is a Puritan and is also able to understand the situation of Mrs. Arbuthnot.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde depicts Lady Chiltern very similar to Hester. Despite the fact that it takes some time she is able to forgive her husband's lie and supports him. On the other hand, in *Lady Windermere's Fan* there is slightly more complicated Lady Windermere. Firstly, she seems to be an innocent victim of her husband's affair, but later in the play she is ready to abandon him and their child. She never tells him the truth that she almost left him and this makes her partially a woman with some dark past. She loves her husband and she is not bad or evil but it was really mean to leave her child and entire life because of some unexplained gossip.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* are these innocent women changed. Nor Gwendolen or Cecily did anything wrong but Wilde portrays them much more naive and comic. Those women are satirized by Wilde. He is mocking their naivety and ideals. Their opinions are quite extraordinary. For example, when Gwendolen is speaking about the name Ernest and claims that she is destined to love someone named that. "*We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my idea has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.*" Wilde is clearly parodying her ideal because it is really absurd to be in love someone based on the name. The similar mockery can be found in Cecily's words: "*You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.*"

Even though the theme of the innocent women can be found in every social comedy written by Oscar Wilde, Wilde always depicts them differently. Sometimes it is an innocent woman or it is some Puritan or a naive young girl. They all stand as the opposite to the fallen women.

Conclusion

This thesis was dedicated to the social comedies of Oscar Wilde, their descriptions of Victorian society as well as their mutual comparison. The thesis can help readers to imagine the social problems and the situation of that period. The aim of this thesis was to analyse four plays and look for commonalities as well as different features of men and women. We have also proved that lying is one of the common features in Wilde's plays and he often writes about dandies and fallen women. Wilde was parodying and mocking the society and its manners which gave an extraordinary look to the times of the 19th century in England. The thesis was describing Wilde's life and its influence on his characters. Oscar Wilde was inspired by some significant events of that period which was reflected in his social comedies.

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