VICTORIAN MORALITY AND ITS VICTIMS: OSCAR WILDE AND HIS CHARACTERS
IN AN IDEAL HUSBAND

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ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde as a father of aesthetic movement changed the minds and life style of people of 19th century. He aimed to integrate beauty and art to expose the art of life as promoter of “Art for Art’s Sake”. Really, he influenced London society by his great domination as a great artist with extraordinary descriptive power. So he tried to criticize traditions, beliefs, customs, behaviors, rituals, and social codes of 19th century in upper class family in which they are well-known as Victorian morality in Victorian Era. According to him people are victims of restrictions in their life then they couldn’t take enough pleasure of it. So they have to sacrifice their desires and aspirations to rescue the frame of their family customs. Thus, Wilde tried to present all conduct contrasts among contemporary people in his literary great works. Actually he depicted his thoughts against Victorian morality in one of his prominent works; An Ideal Husband (1895). An Ideal Husband is Wilde’s third play which revolves around blackmail and political corruption and touches on the themes of public and private honor. It is one of the most serious of Wilde’s social comedies and it contains very strong political overtones, ironically and cynically examining the contemporary political landscape. The play’s main focus is the often corrupt sources of great wealth of which the public is usually ignorant.

KEYWORDS: Oscar Wilde, Victorian Morality, Victims, an Ideal Husband

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde, who blazed sun in the darkness of 19th century, was born on 16 October 1857 in Dublin. He glorified the cultures, customs, and minds of the people of that time Victorian criteria changed according to his elegant thoughts and beliefs in contemporary life. The people were amused and shocked by his domination. Wilde is defined as a very handsome man, quick, engaging, boyish in nature, excellent talker with descriptive power and humorous exaggerations, good tempered, pure minded among the people of his time. He belonged to an upper class family with literary backdrop. His father Sir William Wilde was a well known oculist with great reputation as a poet and writer, his mother Lady Francesca Wilde was successful poet and journalist, she was involved in the Irish novelist movement and wrote revolutionary poems under the name of Speranza. Oscar Wilde talents for languages. He knew French and German. So he had proved himself as a prominent student, first in Dublin then Oxford. He was educated at Royal school, Ennisk illen, Fermanagh (1864-71) Trinity College Dublin (1874-78). While he was at Oxford, he was involved in the aesthetic movement also was a promoter of “Art for Art’s sake.” As he quoted: “Art is not to be taught in Academies. It is what one looks at, not one listens to that makes the artist. The real schools should be the streets.” He continued his literary career as art reviewer and lecturer in United States, Canada, Ireland and Britain. Wilde’s reputation was increased because of his fresh ideas in aesthetics and decadence movement. So he traveled to London to distinguish himself as professor of aesthetics. Thus he influenced the London society by his new definitions of words. He was an excellent talker of his period. Actually his mouth was committed to make beauty itself. Soon he turned into an international figure. In 1883 Wilde arrived
in Paris wearing highest fashion of the day like white gloves, delicate cane, polish silver case, tip cigarette and flower in suit, exactly like creator of aesthetic movement. He got married on April 1884 with Lady Constance Lloyd a girl without any particular advantages while he could have married someone from a more affluent family. Anyway they had two sons; Gyrl and Vyvyan.

Wilde was a pure minded man. He tried to integrate the gross and crude phrases. He was quoted: “knowledge will come to me by pleasure.” Actually he didn’t have any word to explain political, social, ethical, religious views. He joined freely to all aspects of life in Dublin. He never limited himself among texts and books, so his mind was fresh. His concept of beauty came from the Greek idealism which made him an art critic. His opinion challenged the reality of customs in Victorian Era. Sandra F. Siegel was quoted in her essay : “Oscar Wilde: The Spectacle of Criticism: ”Wilde’s power to arouse fantasies in others - and to fulfill them - is seemingly inexhaustible. It is also true that opinions about no other author have been so ill-informed. From the beginning, there appeared to be about Wilde something slightly slant, Earlier in the century the fantasies perhaps might have been dispelled”.

Wilde did not accept obligations and restrictions during his life. To him, life was material of art so artistic views of art were more important than ordinary religious beliefs. He applied the artistic views of beauty in life of 19th century. Actually this kind of progress was compiled from his individuality. Though he was in danger of life meant, excessive popularity. Oscar was angel of decadence in his time.

Walter Pater was quoted in his essay Studies in the Historyof the Renaissance (1873), Oscar Wilde, as professor of decadence established his reputation as an exemple of Victorian aestheticism and a proponent of the doctrine of art for art’s sake. The famous “Conclusion” talked of the flux of life and of the necessity of experiencing with intensity the constantly fleeting impressions: “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life . . Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end . . . For art comes to you professing The Decadent artist upturne moral values and refused a social role in society (he/she was an iconoclast).

Wilde was one of the principle exponents of the ‘new aesthetic’ in England, following the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, mainly Rossetti and Swinburne, but going further into the realms of aestheticism by adding Pater and the Decadent traditions. According to his theory, the artist was free and superior to other men. Artists avoided the common everyday life to look for an escape into and realized beauty that existed principally in the imagination. By the end of the century, Aestheticism developed into Decadent art, which presented the find siècle malaise (or the maladies find siècle) that haunted European intellectuals. So the story of his decadence was started with Lord Alfred (Boisie) Duoglas. When he was visited Boise Duoglas for the first time. He was interested in his personal beauty with large blue eyes and golden hair. Wilde gave him extraordinary pleasure. So he was changed Oscar’s world, so he was with Boise most of his times. He truly devoted himself to Boise. In the meantime, rumors were raised around that thi ruined Oscar’s repudiation. Actually Marquis of Queensberry as Boise’s father sued him. He tried to stop this unhealthy relationship. Eventually Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years hard labor because of his homosexual affair. But he never stopped writing so, he wrote The Ballad of Reading Goal to describe his situation in pris on. Eventually he was released in 1897; he spent the rest of his life wandering around in Europe. He lived in cheap hotels, and finally died on November 30, 1900, in very poor shape in a cheap hotel in Paris.

As mentioned above, Oscar belonged to Victorian age. He reflected the social problems of that time in his literary works. Victorian age had its particular morality and cultures. Nineteenth century, Queen’s century, was the age of Queen’s Victoria. Claire Drazninin Victorian’s Middle-Class House wife, quote, Victorian morality is a distillation of the moral
views of people living at the time of Queen Victoria’s reign (1837–1901) and of the moral climate of the United Kingdom throughout the 19th century in general, which contrasted greatly with the morality of the previous Georgian period. Victorian morality can describe any set of values that espouse sexual restraint, low tolerance of crime and a strict social code of conduct. Due to the prominence of the British Empire, many of these values were spread across the world. So, 19th century was presented by customs and virtues whose were based on religion. In this period of time the element of religion as an effective term influenced all aspects of daily life of 19th century. So it changed the thoughts, ideas, the styles of life and even expressions of emotions and beliefs among people. Really it was the time of restriction which relied on censorship and censor of human feelings to expose a society in standard frame. Actually it was time of contradictions. For example church raised the flag of morality while the society was faced with social phenomena like, growth of prostitution. Similarly, the church became extremely wealthy while the child labour increased. So the church was still emphasizing the goodness while it was still committed to elites and their needs. The Victorian and upper class families were insisting on the values of family heritage and history. They believed in preserving the value of their life. They saw themselves as protectors of society. At the same time, people in the middle and lower classes believed that working hard would lead to wealth and prosperity. However, the truth was that men and women were not allowed to speak about their true feelings and that they used language of flower to expose their real feelings. So in this situation homosexuality was a complicated question in Victorian culture so it was horrible crime until 1861.thus Victorian moralities were used hypocritically among people. The situation led to many men and women being unfairly victimized.

Oscar Wilde tried to depict this in one of his works: An Ideal Husband. Oscar was quoted about corruption of Victorian age in concept of marriage: “Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious: both are disappointed.” An Ideal Husband was published in 1895 with great concerns among people. It had taken the Victorian morality along as they included; political corruption, affair, flirtation, blackmailing, among an upper class family. Actually this play was based on an upper class family. It explained a kind of social clash among Chiltern, Cheveley and Goring families in the context of Victorian decency. It opened during a dinner party at the house of Sir Robert Chiltern, as a part of the House of Commons. So he gathered all of their close friends and the other colleagues of Sir Robert. During the party one of the guests, Mrs Cheveley tried to black mailed Sir Robert because of his corrupted political role with regards to building a canal in Argentina, based on fraudulent plan. As she said to Sir Robert: My dear Sir Robert, you are man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose everybody has nowadays. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms. 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 have all to pay for what we do. You have to pay now. You have got to promise me to suppress your report, and to speak in the House in favor of this scheme. Then you must make it possible, you know what your English newspapers are like. When I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and given them this scandal and the proofs of it. So I realize that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a stock exchange speculator a Cabinet secret. I mean that I know the real origin of you wealth and your career, and I have got your letter too. The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley’s secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase. You thought that letter had been destroyed. How foolish of you! It is in my possession. So Mrs Cheveley noted to Sir Robert that she would ruin his life if he refused her offer. Though Sir Robert tried to preserve his career and material life,. So he spoke to Lord Goring, and he advised Sir Robert that My dear Robert, it’s a very awkward business, very awkward indeed. You should have told your wife the whole thing. Secrets from other people’s wives are a necessary luxury in modern life. So at least, I am always
told at the club by people who are bald enough to know better. But no man should have a secret from his own wife. She invariably finds it out. Women have a wonderful instinct about things.

They can discover everything except the obvious. But Sir Robert refused his suggestion because he was in the best kind of love and marital life with his wife. So he was sure if his wife found out about this scandal his life will be destroyed and he would definitely lose her. In Lady Chiltern’s point of view, their marriage was based on an ideal marriage with ideal husband, So Sir Robert tried to be impeccable husband and followed her wishes. But eventually Sir Robert caved in to Mrs Cheveley’s wishes in order to save his social, political, social life. Meantime it was a diamond brooch in which Lord Goring were taken it from somebody but now asked Miss Mabel to keep it. Apparently this diamond brooch was stolen by Mrs Cheveley from her cousin but now she had lost it. She searched very hard to find it. In the course of play Lord Goring announced that he and Mrs Cheveley had been engaged a while. He told to Sir Robert: “I got engaged to be married to her while I was staying at the Tenbys. The affair lasted for three days, because she used to be confoundedly fond of money, so Robert you must fight with her.” When Mrs Cheveley was found out Sir Robert was not performed in her interest, then, she was gone to their place. She was made everything clear regarding the nature of that insolent letter, in which cleared the political corruption of Sir Robert. She was told everything about the letter and the origin of their wealth which came from selling a Cabinet secret. But it raised a horrible discussion between the wife and husband. As she said to Sir Robert: “You a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonor! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true.” Although Sir Robert wanted to convince her to listen to his story of temptation. He tried to tell her the whole thing. But she did not listen to him because she thought her husband had sold himself for money, so he lied to the whole world.

So she felt her life was ruined by her husband’s temptation. So she was discouraged. She wrote letter on pink paper to Lord Goring and asked for help. “I trust you, I want you, I am coming to you. Gertrude.” Lord Gorin received the pink letter from Lady Chiltern; he was surprised then read it and kept it in the drawer. He left drawing room and went to smoking room and told Phipps his servant to keep his guests in the drawing room and then call him. Similarly Mrs Cheveley had gone to his place to sell him Sir Robert’s letter.

But Phipps guided her to drawing room. After a while, she found the pink letter she was supposed to find. “Oh a very uninteresting correspondence! How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of a middle-class romance. I know that handwriting. That is Gertrude Chiltern’s.” So she was taken it up to make another scandal against her marital life. Actually she was her enemy from their school days. After a while Lord Goring came to her. They were speaking about marriage. Sir Robert entered suddenly and really got restless and angry for being in his house. Finally Lord Goring asked her regarding her price to that corrupted political letter. She said: “Oh, how absurdly you English are! The English think that a cheque-book can solve every problem in life, why my dear Arthur, I have very much more money than you have, and quite as much as Robert was hold of. Money is not what I want. On morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern’s letter. That is my offer. I will give it to you now, if you promise to marry me.” Meantime Lord Goring made an attempt to trick her. He discussed about the diamond brooch which she had stolen from his cousin, Mary Berkshir. In fact he gave her this diamond brooch as her marriage gift. But now he found out, the diamond brooch was stolen by her so he threatened her and asked her to hand in back Sir Roberet’s letter otherwise he will fetch the police. Finally she was convinced to give the letter back then, he took the letter and checked it and then burnt it. But when she asked for water, because she had stolen the letter she was refused the water. Eventually she declared that she wanted to send that love letter of Lady Chiltern to his husband, Sir Robert, so she went out of his house. Lord Goring met Lady Chiltern. He explained to her that Mrs Cheveley had stolen her letter from his room and she wanted to send it to your
husband. While they were speaking Robert entered suddenly with letter in his hands. Actually he made a mistake. That letter was addressed to him by his wife, so he was cheer up. He found out that this letter was also burnt by Lord Goring. So Lord Goring asked her to forgive Sir Robert since he saved their life. She forgave her husband then their mood changed to normal again. Finally Lord Goring announced that he was in love with Sir Robert’s sister, Miss Mabel Chiltern but in spite of Sir Robert’s objections they got married and play was ended happily Thus, An Ideal Husband, as social comedy had strong political reflection. It examined the contemporary life in 19th century by political scenery. The play was focused on public corruption, but more in an upper class family.

It tried to deliver the message how money influenced the destiny of people by having knowledge about their private life. Then it made a business transaction in this case we were pointed to Mrs Cheveley’s great power to Sir Robert just by having his past secretive matters. So the action of people brought a conflict between citizenry and individual ethics, and examined the personal interests. Oscar Wilde pointed to debatable nature of marriage in An Ideal Husband. He wanted to interpret it as a kind of corrupt and corrupting. For example, the Chilterns believed that they had ideal marriage based on materialistic value. Oscar Wilde explained the lack of morality in their marriage. Actually Characters struggled with deceiptiveness, pharisaic, double social standards, and corruption in political aspects. So materialism shifted the play towards standard morality among people. Thus, hypocritical reactions ruined so many social values. Oscar Wilde talked here about the circumstance of woman in society. He was quoted: A Man’s Life Is More Important Than Women’s Life”. It brought Sexism in society. Though some critics were believed, the play was imitated from the style of Alexandre Dumas and it was influenced by the events in Paris in 1893.

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