An Ideal Husband

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde grew up in an artistic and intellectual Anglo-Irish household. His father was a surgeon and folklorist, and his mother was a devoted Irish nationalist and well-known poet. She introduced Wilde to Irish poetry and neo-classical painting and sculpture at an early age. Wilde studied classics at Trinity College in Dublin and then at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he became deeply involved with the aesthetic movement. This controversial group of Oxford students disavowed traditionally masculine pursuits and conventional manners and sought to make daily life approximate a work of art. Wilde became one of its most famous members. After graduating, he wrote many direct and indirect defenses of aestheticism in his poetry, journalism, and dramatic works. He was famous for his magnetic personality, sharp wit, and bizarre fashion sense. In conservative Victorian London society, he was also notorious for several semi-public homosexual relationships and encounters. In 1894, the Marquess of Queensbury, who was the father of Wilde's lover, publicly accused Wilde of "sodomy." Wilde sued him for libel, lost, and was subsequently imprisoned for "public indecency." He served two years of hard labor, which seriously weakened his health. A few years after his release, he died of cerebral meningitis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wilde was a supporter of Irish nationalism, an issue that was at the forefront of Irish and British politics in the late 19th century. He advocated for Irish independence in his journalistic work, particularly in defending the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. In the play, Lady Chiltern mentions that she is in favor of "The Higher Education of Women," which is also the title of an 1866 book by British feminist Emily Davies. In 1869, Davies co-founded Girton College, the first women's college in Britain. Lady Chiltern is also a member of the Women's Liberal Association; the WLA was a branch of the Women's Liberal Federation, which fought for women's suffrage. British women did not receive full voting rights until 1928.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In his university days, Wilde was greatly inspired by Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, works that took up one of the central issues of the aesthetic movement: must works of art possess a political conscience, or should they aspire to aesthetic excellence alone? Ruskin argued that art must be allied somehow to moral value, while Pater believed that art should exist for its own sake. Notably, however, both scholars emphasized art's responsibility to truth. The aesthetic movement finds its roots in Romantic poets like John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley; a more distant precursor is hedonism, the ancient Greek philosophy of pleasure. As some of the central works of the aesthetic movement, Oscar Wilde's plays influenced French Symbolist writers like André Gide and satirical British novelists like Evelyn Waugh, who wrote affectionate satires of aesthetic mores.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *An Ideal Husband*
- **When Written:** 1884
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1885
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Play; an unusual combination of social satire and sentimental melodrama.
- **Setting:** Late 19th century London, in the homes of Sir Chiltern and Lord Goring.
- **Climax:** The moment when Mrs. Cheveley gives Lord Goring the incriminating letter.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Cheveley
- **Point of View:** A play has no narrator, but this play's sly and humorous stage directions arguably constitute a third-person omniscient narrative voice.

EXTRA CREDIT

A scandalous play. When *The Ideal Husband* was first performed on stage, Wilde was arrested and imprisoned. Several actors in the production testified against him.

A man on a pedestal. Lord Alfred, Wilde's partner in later years, once said to Wilde: "When you are not on your pedestal you are not interesting."

PLOT SUMMARY

The curtain lifts to show a large, beautifully appointed drawing room where Lady Chiltern is receiving her guests: beautiful socialites like Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, conservative politicians like Lord Caversham, and clever dandies like Lord Goring. In a minute, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley join the party. Sir Robert Chiltern comes in and meets Mrs. Cheveley, who charms him with mysterious pronouncements on romance,

affectation, and politics, and hints that she must ask him for a favor.

Soon most of the guests go down to dinner. Mrs. Cheveley takes the opportunity to reveal that she plans to blackmail Robert into supporting a fraudulent project called the Argentine Canal scheme. If he does not speak of it positively to the House of Commons, Mrs. Cheveley will make public a letter in which he sold a government secret. The letter would bring about Robert's social and political ruin. At first Robert refuses proudly, prompting Mrs. Cheveley to deliver a cynical speech about the hypocrisy of English morality. But the threat of disgrace is too devastating, and Robert finally agrees to support the scheme.

In a little while, the guests return. Robert's sister Mabel finds a **brooch** in the couch cushions, and Lord Goring asks to hold on to it for the moment. Mrs. Cheveley tells Lady Chiltern about Robert's change of heart regarding the Argentine Canal, and triumphantly takes her leave. Lady Chiltern senses some sort of foul play, and asks Robert for an explanation. He tries to defend his decision, but finally agrees to write Mrs. Cheveley and retract his promise: Lady Chiltern has made it clear to him that their marriage hangs in the balance if he does not do the right thing.

The next morning, Robert talks with Lord Goring and asks him for help. Goring advises Robert to be entirely honest with Lady Chiltern, and to count on her forgiveness; but Robert explains despairingly that his wife does not tolerate imperfections, and would certainly never forgive him for an error as grave as the one he committed. Robert also describes how Baron Arnheim once intoxicated him with speeches about ambition and power, and admits that his old friend's words still seem quite true, since power is a means to freedom. But Lord Goring implies that wealth and power are empty in themselves, and that Robert's dishonesty has led not to freedom but to his ruin.

When Lady Chiltern comes home, Lord Goring tries to explain to her that all people have weaknesses and imperfections, even the best people; and that the only way to understand the world is to look at it with a generous eye, instead of demanding that it conform to a set of rigid expectations.

In a little while, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley enter. Mrs. Cheveley asks about a missing diamond brooch, but none has been found. Lady Markby leaves soon afterwards. Mrs. Cheveley tells Lady Chiltern about Robert's secret and quickly leaves. Lady Chiltern is consumed with disappointment and dismay: she tells Robert that he no longer deserves to be her ideal. Robert angrily explains that he does not want to be her ideal – he wants to be loved for himself. He leaves, and she dissolves into tears.

The third act finds Lord Goring at home, chatting pleasantly and philosophically with his butler. Robert comes to visit, and Lord Goring tries once again to convince him to tell his wife the truth. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cheveley enters unnoticed and hides in an adjoining room. Robert discovers her by accident and leaves in confusion. Mrs. Cheveley offers to give Robert's incriminating letter to Lord Goring if he agrees to marry her. Lord Goring refuses, and quite suddenly locks her missing brooch around her wrist. She had stolen it from Lord Goring's cousin years ago. In fear of the police, Mrs. Cheveley hands over Robert's letter and leaves.

The final act takes place the following morning. Robert has made a brilliant speech against the Argentine Canal, and he has been elected to a seat in the Cabinet. Lady Chiltern suggests that he retire from politics, but after speaking with Lord Goring she resolves to encourage Robert to pursue whatever makes him happy. Mabel and Lord Goring become engaged, Robert and lady Chiltern reconcile, and peace is restored.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lord Arthur Goring – The play's hero, an idle bachelor, a tireless seeker of pleasure, a mild-mannered social critic, and a shining wit: the exemplary dandy philosopher. He earns the title of dandy by applying the dandy's principal modes – joy, humor – to the pursuit of truth. Truth, he finds, is often occluded by propriety and cliché, and with the point of his wit he tries to scrape them off. He is primarily concerned with the truth of human relationships, their delights and boredoms. He is far from "heartless," as his father Lord Caversham believes, since he holds his friends dearer than anything else. In his admirable romance with Mabel, his philosophy seems to find its reward.

Sir Robert Chiltern – A well-liked, busy politician known for his integrity in both public and private life. In the beginning of the play, he seems to be entirely in control of his fate. He is successful, esteemed, and happily married to Lady Chiltern: his life seems to be following some universally desirable plan. But the sudden crisis in his life brought about by Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail reveals not only his past indiscretions but also his profound inner confusion on matters of goodness, ambition, and love. He has floated along on the currents of other people's ideas – Baron Arnheim's ideas about power and ambition, society's ideas about honor and success. The crisis finally forces him to think deeply about his values. By the end of the play, his socially determined belief system has given way to a private, inner system, which settles him more surely in both his marriage and his career.

Lady Gertrude Chiltern – Sir Robert's wife, an icy, fastidious woman who takes pride in her finely tuned moral sense. She always categorizes people into "bad" and "good", and recognizes no middle ground. Her idea of the good, like her husband's, is determined more by social conventions than by ethical considerations. But when she finds that she has categorized

her own husband as "bad," she begins to reconsider her system. With Lord Goring's help, she sees that it's important to forgive people's flaws - that it's more important to see people fully than to sort them according to abstractions.

Mrs. Cheveley – A well-dressed, intelligent, manipulative woman who is faintly connected to all three protagonists. She went to school with Lady Chiltern, was briefly engaged to Lord Goring, and has a fateful mutual friend with Sir Robert. Her dandyism superficially resembles Lord Goring's in its preoccupation with fashion, wit, and pleasure, but there is a fundamental difference between them. Lord Goring seeks to *separate* conventional values from private values, their appearance from their reality, in order to honor that reality. Mrs. Cheveley seeks to *conflate* appearance with reality in order to discredit and trivialize moral reality, the empathetic moral core beneath the ornament of politeness. She implies that no such thing exists. This attitude, which initially seems like a sort of sophistication, is finally exposed as blindness.

Baron Arnheim – A mysterious figure from Robert Chiltern's youth, and a former attachment of Mrs. Cheveley's. In his lifetime, he preached the utter importance of power. He exists in the play not as a person but as an idea: he is the abstract version of Mrs. Cheveley's corruption, the amoral root of all Robert's troubles.

Lord Caversham – Lord Goring's father, an irritable, stubborn man who frequently commands Lord Goring to grow up. He wants Lord Goring to marry, enter politics, and generally behave in a dignified manner. He is continually perplexed and frustrated by Lord Goring's behavior, because he fails to realize that he and his son have incompatible ideas of adultness and seriousness. Lord Caversham believes that there is exactly one way to live well, while Lord Goring believes that there are countless ways. The former is conservatism; the latter is dandyism, which makes life into art, and holds that good lives are as rare and various as works of art.

Lady Markby – A pleasant, decorous elderly lady who accompanies Mrs. Cheveley to all social events, apparently to lend Mrs. Cheveley an air of decency. In all respects, Lady Markby is the image of conservatism: her guiding lights are all the conventions that are just beginning to go out of style. Every time she speaks, she unthinkingly recites the curious prejudices of the upper classes. Her mild-mannered female conservatism complements Lord Caversham's aggressive male conservatism.

Mabel Chiltern – Sir Robert Chiltern's sister, a lovely, funny young woman. Mabel takes frivolousness as seriously as Lord Goring. She is the only person in the play who can truly match wits with him, and their inscrutable, delightful wordplay is the form cast by their romance. Mabel and Lord Goring get engaged near the end of the play.

Phipps – Lord Goring's imperturbable butler, who caters to Lord Goring's whims with a mixture of affection and strained tolerance. His perfect seriousness stands in counterpoint to Lord Goring's perfect frivolousness, because both attitudes are seamless, opaque masks. Phipps' seriousness has more in common, aesthetically, with Lord Goring's frivolousness than with Lord Caversham's seriousness, which is awkward and transparent.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon – Pretty, charming, eccentric young friends of the Chilterns. Their principal pleasure is an elaborate form of vague, glittering banter, and their principal occupation is their pleasure. They try to undo the duller aspects of propriety though humor.

Vicomte de Nanjac – An attaché at the French Embassy, and an amusing guest of the Chilterns.

Tommy Trafford – Mabel Chiltern's dull admirer, who proposes to her more often than she would like.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURAL AND THE ARTIFICIAL

Like nearly all aspects of Oscar Wilde's work, this theme is rooted in aestheticism, a controversial late-19th-century student movement of which Wilde was a part. Aesthetes, or "dandies", argued that works of art should be measured by aesthetic rather than moral criteria; they also believed that life should approximate a work of art. In explicit reference to this philosophy, Wilde introduces almost every character in the play by comparing him or her to the work of a painter or sculptor. If life is a work of art, then one's behavior can only be bad art or good art, never nature. The lives of animals and plants are dictated almost entirely by biology, but the lives of human beings are deliberate. Therefore, naturalism is either sloppy art or a cunning facade ("a very difficult pose to keep up").

Lord Goring, Mabel Chiltern, and Mrs. Cheveley – the dandies of the play – believe that is impossible to act naturally. In different ways, they all disparage naturalism, which seems to them a bizarre and alarming narrow-mindedness. To assert that one particular manner or way of life is "natural" is to believe that there is precisely one correct way to be human – a delusion responsible for most varieties of hate and prejudice. To assert such a thing also appears naïve and laughable. In this play, especially, naturalism is tragicomic.

Wilde's contempt is not for nature, though, but for the misconception that it is possible to act naturally. The play as a whole does not deny the existence of the natural, nor does it conflate the natural and the artificial. Its characters do refer to one kind of nature in good faith: "nature" as a synonym for "character" or "personality." Such usage implies that there exists in every person something apart from mannerisms, rouge, and wit. One's nature, a locus of beliefs and values, can never be fully or accurately conveyed through behavior; this is the true reason that "natural" behavior is impossible. By behaving in a way that is explicitly artificial, dandies like Lord Goring honor and protect the natural.

ROMANCE, BOREDOM, AND DELIGHT

If life is a form of art, and art's purpose is to delight and occasionally to instruct, then boredom – which withers delight and inhibits learning – is to be avoided at all costs. For this reason, boredom is a significant preoccupation for the dandyish characters of the play. Characters assert at various times that obligations are boring ("Well, my duty is a thing I never do, on principle. It always depresses me"), goodness is boring, common sense is boring, earnestness is boring, perfection is boring ("We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it"), and romance is boring ("Englishmen always get romantic after a meal, and that bores me dreadfully"). Romance, especially, is boring because it is a mixture of goodness, obligation, and earnestness. Like the other items on the list, it is too heavy a feeling to be delightful; delight is nimble, spontaneous, and changeable.

Yet, as the play's ending demonstrates, when life comes to a crisis – the crisis of the Chilterns' marriage, and the crisis of Robert's reputation – one must move beyond the distinction between the boring and the amusing. The distinction is useful only to a certain point; it is important to the artifice of social life, but less so at times when human nature is more exposed. In moments of crisis, it is the distinction between empathy and egotism, between goodness and heartlessness, which guides the play's heroes and heroines.

THE TRIVIAL AND THE SERIOUS

In a famous collection of aphorisms, Wilde wrote that "dullness is the coming of age of seriousness." The phrase suggests that dullness is the final, truest form of seriousness, and its inevitable consequence. In the play, serious manners are boring and unappealing almost as a rule – several times, seriousness is called "unbecoming," and common sense is "plain" – and by that virtue necessarily fail in delivering important, truthful ideas. To be heard one must be amusing, and to be amusing one must avoid seriousness: this is an important aspect of the philosophy of the dandy.

For other characters in the play, however, the effort to amuse oneself and others is a sign of triviality – of shallowness, frivolousness, or even "heartlessness." Older, conservative characters like Lord Caversham believe that the world can be cleanly divided into good, important, serious things and bad, unimportant, trivial things. Serious things include money, marriage, propriety; trivial things include beautiful objects, love, and charm. Goring (and Wilde) believes that the items on the first list are merely the superficial, social, deadened versions of the items on the second list, but this fact is imperceptible to the anti-dandy, who makes no distinction between public and private life, between the appearance of something and the private experience of it.

Ultimately, the play satirizes and inverts the distinction between the trivial and the serious to emphasize that *acting* seriously does not mean *feeling* seriously, and that people who act seriously as a rule often conflate the two. The inversions also show that the trivial and the serious are not stable, socially determined categories but ephemeral attitudes that can be applied to anything, from politics to **buttonholes**.

WIT, CHARM, AND CONTRARINESS

Most wit, in this play, consists in saying the opposite of something commonly accepted as truth. This sort of wit insists giddily that if one abstracts enough, each thing is as true as its opposite. It's a sophistry that serves to show not that truth is unstable, but that generalizations have little to do with truth – though they are enjoyable if one doesn't take them too seriously.

Older, stodgier characters associate wit and verbal play with triviality. But instead it is a form of broad-mindedness that is close to wisdom, and that expresses itself as deliberate uncertainty. Dandies believe that there is more value in speaking well about nothing – "I love talking about nothing, father," says Lord Goring, "It is the only thing I know anything about" – than in speaking boringly about 'important' issues. But such contrariness does not reduce to faith in emptiness or nothingness: it is not a destructive amorality (except when performed by a truly destructive person like Mrs. Cheveley). Wit and contrariness expose the emptiness of certain customs and proprieties in order to make way for actual human contact, and for genuine moral reasoning.

LOVE, MORALITY, AND FORGIVENESS

Mrs. Cheveley, the 'heartless' dandy of the play, thinks that goodness and morality are poses with nothing behind them: she complains that "every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues." But Lord Goring, the dandy philosopher, knows that morality can be both a pose and a true condition of inner life. He tries to teach Lady Chiltern to love

and forgive her husband, because he believes that love and forgiveness are fundamental to a good, happy life. But he would never say so at a party.

Lord Goring's earnest efforts to reunite the Chilterns, and his own happy entrance into domestic life with Mabel, show that dandyism and aestheticism do not set themselves against love, kindness, and ordinary happiness – on the contrary, dandyism's charms and tricks serve to elevate that happiness. Dandyism sets itself against the empty rituals of family morals in defense of real joy.

From beginning to end, Mrs. Cheveley remains the amoral villain of the play, and Lord Goring its sublimely moral hero. The only characters who truly develop in this respect are Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern. In the beginning of the play, both husband and wife see themselves as impeccably moral, because they follow a certain set of socially dictated rules – a mixture of diluted religion and exaggerated propriety. When Robert's predicament tests their faith in these rules, they become quite confused and helpless: they find that the rules are of no use in an actual crisis. But with Lord Goring's help, they begin to build a true moral base grounded in complex experience and deep mutual sympathy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE STOLEN BROOCH

The stolen brooch, which clasps shut around Mrs. Cheveley's wrist, marks her as a liar and a thief. Like Robert's letter to Baron Arnheim, it is the unambiguous incarnation of moral ambiguity. Both Robert and Mrs. Cheveley try to dismiss the moral implications of their actions, and both are cowed by the shame of actual evidence. One could argue that Mrs. Cheveley's distress is not shame but fear of public disgrace, but the text suggests otherwise. When Mrs. Cheveley finds that she cannot remove the bracelet, she looks as though "a mask has fallen from her" – the mask of her beauty and her social graces, which conceals an inwardness she has previously denied. The brooch, then, is evidence not only of her crime but of the reality of that inwardness, the constellation of values that guides all actions, serious and trivial.

THE BUTTONHOLE

When Lord Goring comes home at the beginning of the third act, he exchanges a day buttonhole (a small flower arrangement, like a corsage) for an evening one. We shortly learn that the buttonhole, one of "the delicate fopperies of fashion," is in fact out of fashion at present – no important people wear it. Its unpopularity does not bother Lord Goring, who believes that "fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear." The buttonhole is meant to mark a person as insignificant or perhaps middle-class, but Lord Goring happily short-circuits the frigid signaling system that connects clothes and social status. Fashion, for him, is not that signaling system: it is the delicate, inscrutable transfer of meaning from person to object. The buttonhole, at that historical moment, is a trivial item, and Lord Goring wishes it to be "more trivial" still. Its triviality is a mark of its freedom from the serious social games of adults, games with interminable rules, harsh sanctions, and very few rewards. The games extend so far and wide that it requires constant vigilance and good humor to distinguish them from life, and Lord Goring's buttonhole is a sign of that vigilance.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *An Ideal Husband* published in 2000.

Act 1, Part 1 Quotes

Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

Related Characters: Mabel Chiltern (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the moments before this quote, Lord Caversham, a traditional-minded elderly gentleman, speaks about Lord Goring to the young and charming Mabel Chiltern. As he speaks, Lord Caversham complains to her about the social life of the younger generation, and Mabel responds with this quip.

Mabel's defense of London society rests, simply, in the delight and amusement it gives her, which are themselves the new society's highest values. In other ways, too, her response mirrors the new society: her amusement shows itself in the paradoxical, counter-intuitive, silly quality of her answer, for one would not expect a clever and prosperous young woman to praise insanity and stupidity. Yet though her praise seems irrational, it also paints a delightful picture.

Mabel mentions that society has "immensely improved." It is interesting to imagine the prior society, from which the new one has evolved, as the opposite of the new: where the new

society Mabel praises has "beautiful idiots," we might imagine the older society filled with grey-faced scholars, and where the new society has "brilliant lunatics," we can imagine the old full of boring, sensible couples. Paired with its alternative, Mabel's praise seems all the more reasonable, though no less amusing for it.

Act 1, Part 2 Quotes

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN
You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY
Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

Related Characters: Sir Robert Chiltern, Mrs. Cheveley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Sir Robert Chiltern meets Mrs. Cheveley for the first time at his own party. They banter carelessly, without apparent purpose or meaning, but certain aspects of the conversation seem to foreshadow the harm Mrs. Cheveley tries to inflict on Sir Robert.

It appears initially that the play's protagonists are the young, charming dandies, and its antagonists the elderly, stodgy conservatives; but in fact the dandies are both antagonists and protagonists - the moral dandy, Lord Goring, is the hero, and the amoral dandy, Mrs. Cheveley, is the villain.

The quote hints at the nature of Mrs. Cheveley's amorality. Though she, like all dandies, believes social behavior is primarily a pose, a theatrical performance, she makes no distinction between the performance of the natural and the performance of the artificial. The natural, to her, is emptied of all moral weight: it is in no way a moral center to return to, and can therefore be worn as a mask just as much as the artificial. For the moral dandies, the natural cannot truly be performed, because it exists apart from social games and amusements. It is a core of values which must be guarded so that it can be accessed in times of crisis.

Oh! I am not at all romantic. I am not old enough. I leave romance to my seniors.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring makes the above remark to Mrs. Cheveley, to whom he is introduced at Robert Chiltern's party, though he has previously met her elsewhere. The relation between them at this point appears to be friendly but not at all warm.

Although Lord Goring, a man of uncertain age, seems to be more or less adult, he claims here to be too young for romance. This quote is an example of the dandy's beloved art of paradox and surprise. Though love and romance are thought conventionally to be the province of the young, Lord Goring declares confidently that they are the business of "seniors." What does he mean? If you have read to the end of the play, you know that he is certainly not immune to love. When he says 'romance,' he means not love itself, but its boring, lukewarm, sentimental rituals, the pretty words and dull occasions required in polite society. Love is youthful, and youth is mischievous; therefore Lord Goring refuses to participate in games which do not amuse him.

I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring is speaking to his father, Lord Caversham, who is scolding him for leading a wayward, empty-headed life. He wants his son to pursue some sort of serious occupation, to fill his life with the objects and attributes of serious adulthood (wife, children, politics, large furniture).

Lord Goring's manner with his father is as light-footed as always, and, like Mabel, he defends himself with the very object of his defense: wit, paradox, and delight. When his father exhorts him to enter into the solid world of adulthood, Lord Goring replies that he loves not solid things but "nothing," the ephemeral, iridescent nothing that passes between people when they are really enjoying each other's company. He implies that this "nothing" is the only thing that *can* be known, since it is actually felt, whereas customary,

polite behaviors and adult objects are hidden behind a veil of indifference.

LORD CAVERSHAM
You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

LORD GORING
What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring, Lord Caversham (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring continues to lightheartedly defend himself from his well-meaning father, who now accuses him of hedonism (a life solely devoted to the pursuit of pleasure). Lord Caversham, out of long habit, firmly believes that serious things are important, and important things are not fun. Lord Goring tries to show him the folly of his reasoning. What remains of these serious things, as we grow older? Of course we may feel proud of our accomplishments, but only if they gave us pleasure in the first place - not immediate gratification, necessarily, but pleasure nonetheless. This sort of pleasure turns into a more long-term happiness: in other words, pleasure and happiness are continuous, as they are in the quote itself. We know from later events in the play that Lord Goring's definition of pleasure and happiness goes beyond fashionable parties - that it also extends to difficult and important moral issues. One can be serious occasionally, but happiness still acts as a moral compass.

I like looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people.

Related Characters: Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, two guests at the Chilterns' party, are minor characters in the play, but they faithfully represent the dandy philosophy. Everything they say seems simultaneously meaningless and true, and the joke lies in the tension between the two qualities.

Here, like in Lord Goring's comment about romance, we have an inversion of an accepted truth, since people generally believe it is good to listen to smart people, and to look at beautiful people. Is the quip simply nonsense or is there something to it? As with the other jokes, if it were truly nonsense, it wouldn't have power to charm us. To look at a genius and to listen to a beautiful person is to avoid staring a fact squarely in the face, to experience it more peripherally - the genius and the beauty both coming in through the side door. The quote also implies that it is just as interesting to consider someone's weaknesses (a genius's looks, perhaps, or a beautiful person's intelligence), and that the most interesting thing of all is to experience virtues and flaws simultaneously.

As with the other dandy quips, this quotation can be analyzed down to a serious idea, but it works best in its original enigmatic form.

Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—one after the other.

Related Characters: Mrs. Cheveley (speaker), Sir Robert Chiltern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Cheveley has revealed her evil intentions to Robert. She knows that he once sold a government secret, when he was very young, and she plans to use her knowledge to force him to vote for a fraudulent scheme - the Argentine Canal. At first he refuses to yield to her demand, but slowly his resolve gets weaker and weaker. In this quote, she mocks his hesitation.

We have said that Mrs. Cheveley is the villain of the play, the amoral dandy, and in this quote she makes her attitude toward moral precepts quite clear. As always with dandies, it is difficult to be certain whether or not she is joking, but in this case her words are borne out by her actions. In Mrs. Cheveley worldview, morality is a fad, something utterly

external and ultimately irrelevant. Virtues, she quips, are "deadly" - they are cumbersome as a decoration and potentially stifling to the spirit. She does not believe there are people who actually live by these decorative claims; she thinks even the most pure people "go over like ninepins" into universal human selfishness and meanness at the least prompting. This belief is both her strength and her downfall.

Robert, that is all very well for other men, for men who treat life simply as a sordid speculation; but not for you, Robert, not for you. You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still.

Related Characters: Lady Gertrude Chiltern (speaker), Sir Robert Chiltern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Chiltern has asked her husband why he has agreed to throw his political weight behind the fraudulent Argentine Canal. Robert is too ashamed to tell her the real reason - Mrs. Cheveley's blackmailing scheme - and so he tries to avoid the question by claiming that politics are complicated, and that one must sometimes make moral compromises. Lady Chiltern is horrified by this attitude. She is not at all dandy-ish, and is very solemnly virtuous. She begs Robert to resist the corrupting influence of the political world and to remain the pure, principled man she loves. She even implies that were he to compromise in the way he has described, she would be forced to leave him.

Lady Chiltern's morality is very abstract and very rigid. It is not based on a philosophy of love and kindness, like Lord Goring's morality, but on a traditional and narrow-minded picture of correct behavior. "You have never let the world soil you," she says to Sir Robert; in her philosophy one must retreat from the world like a nun, instead of encountering it in a kind and decent way.

Act 2, Part 1 Quotes

Ah! I prefer a gentlemanly fool any day. There is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Robert has promised his wife to rescind his support of the Argentine Canal, but he fears that Mrs. Cheveley will publicly disgrace him if he does not support it. He describes his problem to Lord Goring, who recommends that Sir Robert explain everything to his wife, but Sir Robert says his wife would never forgive him if she knew the truth. Sir Robert then starts to describe how he was lured into selling the government secret in the first place; he was encouraged by a man named Baron Arnheim, who preached a philosophy of money and power as a means to freedom. Lord Goring exclaims that the Baron is a "scoundrel," but Robert counters that he was a highly intelligent and well-educated man. In response to this comment, Lord Goring says the above quote.

Although Lord Goring thoroughly enjoys wit and intelligence, ultimately it is not wit he values most, but a kind of basic goodness - in his words, a gentlemanliness. His joking manner conceals a serious attachment to traditional ideas of right and wrong.

In fact, I usually say what I really think. A great mistake nowadays. It makes one so liable to be misunderstood.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring continues to listen to Sir Robert's predicament: he has made contradictory promises to his wife, who wants him to do the honorable thing and come out against the Argentine Canal, and to Mrs. Cheveley, who through blackmail has made him promise to support the Canal. Lord Goring continues to insist that Sir Robert should tell his wife the truth. The quote above is an offhand comment, mocking Sir Robert's defensive qualification that part of the money he received for the government secret was used to donate to charities.

The quote reveals quite a lot about Lord Goring's life philosophy. He tries to say what he believes, and would like to be honest and straightforward at all times; but the fact of

the matter is that it is impossible to communicate anything in a straightforward way. Conversation, and language itself, is too full of traps and ambiguities, prejudices, moods, and misunderstandings, to allow for anything like simplicity. So, paradoxically, the best way to communicate what one believes is through joking and paradox - speech patterns that cut through the build-up of convention generally coating ordinary speech.

Act 2, Part 2 Quotes

Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring is speaking to Lady Chiltern about her husband. She still has no idea of his past dishonesty, and believes firmly in his integrity. Lord Goring is trying to discern whether she really would respond to the truth as badly as Sir Robert predicts. He hints that all ambitious politicians must occasionally make mistakes in moral judgment; Lady Chiltern protests that her husband is the exception, and Lord Goring responds with this quote.

Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring are both moralists, but their moral compasses function very differently. Lady Chiltern abides by a strict, childlike picture of right and wrong, and expects the world to bend itself to this picture. Lord Goring, on the other hand, is an observer of human nature, and takes life as it is for his guide. Here again, we see his belief in the natural, since in the quote he describes an aspect of universal human nature. He doesn't try to force people into ill-fitting moral categories, but looks at life with a clear, generous eye, and tries to envision the best possible version of it. If everyone makes mistakes, he implies, we shouldn't ignore the truth in favor of an ideal - we must learn to be forgiving.

All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring continues his conversation with Lady Chiltern. Lord Goring believes life must be "understood," rather than judged; when we try to impose our own moral frameworks on the world, we obscure its most truthful and poignant details. And no matter how much we devote ourselves to the frameworks, they never seem to fit. This is true for both Lady Chiltern's simplistic moral system and for the most complex and profound "German philosophy." Life cannot be known or lived by intellect alone; we must use our sense of mercy, not for the sake of the next world, but for the sake of the here and now.

This quote sheds light on Lord Goring's earlier comment in praise of the "gentlemanly fool." A person who is "gentlemanly," who is kind and generous in his relationships, has a kind of worldly knowledge that is more valuable, according to Goring, than any amount of academic intelligence.

When Tommy wants to be romantic he talks to one just like a doctor.

Related Characters: Mabel Chiltern (speaker), Tommy Trafford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Mabel Chiltern is talking to Lady Chiltern, her sister-in-law, about her annoying suitor, Tommy. Tommy is successful and well-off, but Mabel finds him very dull. Her feelings on romance resemble those of Lord Goring and Lady Cheveley, who believe romance is for old and proper people. Mabel has just reprimanded her other suitor, Lord Goring, for speaking too seriously. Like Lord Goring, she does not feel that youth and love have much to do with seriousness, at least the sort of external seriousness practiced by the older set.

Tommy resembles a doctor when he speaks romantically because both medicine and a certain kind of romance operate according to a set of rules and procedures,

removing any element of fun or play. In medicine and romance, there is a straightforward, oft-repeated relationship between the participants, which cuts out the excitement and uncertainty courtship requires. A medicinal courtship is the process by which the social order tames love, and which tends to muddle its partitions. The dandies' joking disdain of romance is a veiled resistance to larger social structures.

> The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times.

Related Characters: Mrs. Cheveley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Cheveley and Lady Markby have come to the Chilterns' house to look for Mrs. Cheveley's lost brooch. Lady Markby is quite snobbish and conservative, not a dandy like Mrs. Cheveley. When Lady Markby complains about the generation of contemporary society, Mrs. Cheveley objects that the adults must learn from the children, for it is the children who have mastered "the art of living."

Though this quote is spoken by the villainous character of the play, it is a good summary of the dandy philosophy. Even the most mundane daily interactions must be performed as small works of art, which means boredom and cliche must be avoided at all cost. In a sense, the other arts pale in comparison; no instrument can be as complex as the human person, the human psyche, which has the denseness of an entire world. And no other art demands such round-the-clock devotion. But we can assume its rewards are proportionally greater, as well. Mrs. Cheveley's mastery of the dandy art makes us ask, however, what kind of relationship can or should exist between dandyism and gentlemanliness, between art and morality?

> Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike.

Related Characters: Mrs. Cheveley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

After Lady Markby leaves, Mrs. Cheveley speaks to Lady Chiltern more frankly. Lady Chiltern announces that she no longer wishes to see Mrs. Cheveley at any of her parties, but Mrs. Cheveley is indifferent to the hostile gesture. She mocks Lady Chiltern's stony morality, implying that it is a form of naivete, a kind of evidence that she has made herself blind and deaf to the world.

Morality, in Lady Chiltern's view, is universal, because it is made up of self-evident truths somewhat like the Biblical Ten Commandments: one must be honest, brave, fair, unwavering, etc. In this quote, Mrs. Cheveley implies the opposite: if morality is only a flare-up of hostility, then it is different for every person, and, worse, different from moment to moment. It is nothing but an ordinary, low human feeling, like jealousy, irritation, or anger, concealed behind a flimsy mask of self-righteousness. We have to admit that Mrs. Cheveley is not entirely wrong; certainly many people in the world are "moral" in the way she describes. But there is another kind of morality which is more deeply rooted than jealousy or anger, and which is a matter of will and conviction rather than emotion. Mrs. Cheveley is very experienced, but she herself has remained blind to this aspect of human nature.

Act 3, Part 1 Quotes

> One sees that [Lord Goring] stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the narrator, who is obviously very fond of Lord Goring, his fashionable hero. Thus far Lord Goring has been somewhat peripheral to the more striking conflict between Sir Chiltern, Lady Chiltern, and Mrs. Cheveley, but now we have a chance to see him alone at

home, in his domain, bantering with his butler.

Unlike Lady Chiltern, who holds herself at any icy remove from life, Lord Goring "stands in immediate relation" to life; but he doesn't succumb to it blindly - he "masters it." He himself helps to create the conditions of modern life, a task given to every new generation. It is a heavy task, because it requires one to disregard the rules and regulations of past eras while learning enough from them to be able to exceed them. More than anything, it requires a cheerful aversion to authority - a quality Lord Goring has to excess.

The second sentence of the quote is not exactly accurate at face value. Many philosophers have had excellent style. But in Lord Goring, the two qualities - philosophy and fashion - become as one. His philosophy itself is well-dressed, and his clothes are philosophical. The wild and ephemeral rules of fashion guide his deepest thoughts, and the earnest weight of belief affects his choice of attire.

> And falsehoods [are] the truths of other people.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring is speaking to his butler about his buttonhole, which is a small flower arrangement worn on a lapel. The introductory note calls Goring a philosopher, but in this funny dialogue he does not seem to be attempting profundity, or even considering whether or not he means what he says. He is entertaining himself and, arguably, his butler.

But as usual, the off-the-cuff, paradoxical jokes turn out to bear more weight than it would seem. We observe that Lord Goring's jokes, in this quote, have the same structure as Mrs. Cheveley's comment on morality in Act II ("Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike."). As elsewhere, the play challenges us by creating a subtle web of likenesses between the hero and the villain. What Mrs. Cheveley believes about morality, Lord Goring believes about fashion: people we dislike are immoral, people we dislike are unfashionable. Yet we have seen that for Lord Goring, there is a gap between art/philosophy and morality: he appreciates brilliance, but would always prefer "a gentlemanly" - kindly - "fool." Art and philosophy - "the truths of other people" - are an iridescent, shifting veil over the incommunicable human heart.

> But women who have common sense are so curiously plain, father, aren't they?

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker), Lord Caversham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Caversham has come to visit his son at an inconvenient moment, just as Lord Goring is expecting Lady Chiltern for a serious conversation about her marriage. Lord Caversham urges his son to get married and settled down, like the exemplary Sir Robert. The advice has an ironic sound in this moment of the play, when Sir Robert's integrity, career, reputation, and marriage are all teetering on the edge of collapse. Lord Caversham advises his son to use common sense in the matter of marriage, and Lord Goring responds with the above quote.

Common sense is commonly understood as a universal quality of basic understanding. It is common sense that salt does not taste good in a cup of tea, for example. Part of what is known as common sense is a basic knowledge of physical and chemical laws and the properties of the human body; in other words, the knowledge we acquire in early childhood. The other part is a nebulous web of beliefs, and, like any belief thought to be universal, is usually a painfully narrow reflection of a certain time and place. Lord Goring is saying that women (and men, presumably, but this quote is also an echo of the sexist undercurrent in the play's society) who embody the deadened conventional aspect of their society instead of the tumult of human nature are "curiously plain" - curious in their apparently complete self-negation, and totally devoid of charm.

Act 4, Part 1 Quotes

> Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art.

Related Characters: Lord Arthur Goring (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Goring is waiting in Sir Robert's drawing room to speak to him about his conversation with Mrs. Cheveley, who has hatched a new plot against him and his wife - a new blackmailing scheme involving Lady Chiltern's note to Lord Goring, which Mrs. Cheveley takes for a love letter. Once again Lord Caversham interrupts Sir Goring and the plot to scold Lord Goring for his dissolute lifestyle. He continues to insist that Lord Goring should follow in Sir Robert's footsteps, and mentions that Sir Robert has just risen to an even higher rank in his political career by giving a rousing and intelligent speech against the Argentine Canal. Once again, Lord Caversham is a source of dramatic irony, since the audience knows it is actually Lord Goring who is responsible for Sir Robert's speech.

When Lord Goring explains that he is too young to be useful, Lord Caversham complains about this "affectation of youth," and Lord Goring responds with the above quote. This epigram hearkens back, once again, to a quote by Mrs. Cheveley, discussed above, in which she calls the art of living "the only fine art." Youth is not an affectation, because it isn't a mask one can simply put on and take off; it a complicated, demanding role that takes great skill and subtlety. The type of youth Lord Goring practices is not a set of stony conventions, but a unique, difficult, delightful role, which he himself invents.

> Well, my duty is a thing I never do, on principle. It always depresses me.

Related Characters: Mabel Chiltern (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring are carrying on their very funny courtship. Lord Goring had been forced to miss his riding date with Mabel earlier that morning, and she scolds him with mock ill-humor. She observes that he continues to look delighted, and he admits he always has a delighted look when he is near her. Then they have the above exchange.

Duty, like common sense, is depressing because it is generally a form of narrow-mindedness posing as universality. It is so dull and oppressive to dip into this conventional stream, that when they encounter anything resembling duty or common sense, Mabel and the other dandies try their best to do just the opposite. It is not a perfect system, but it protects them from what they collectively dread - the boredom of bad art.

> An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world....He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . to be . . . oh! a real wife to him.

Related Characters: Mabel Chiltern (speaker), Lord Arthur Goring

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Mabel Chiltern has accepted Lord Goring's proposal of marriage, and has made friends with his father, the cranky Lord Caversham. Lord Caversham warns his son that he must be "an ideal husband" to Mabel, but Mabel objects that she does not want such a husband. We can guess that an ideal husband is someone who resembles Robert: successful, upstanding, and burdened by abstract criteria of goodness. Mabel, however, wants Lord Goring to be his ordinary, earthly self, not "something in the next world." She prefers delight to purity. And she herself does not want to be an ideal wife, but a "real wife." Theirs is to be a marriage which "stands in immediate relation to modern life."

Lord Caversham's comment about the "common sense" in Mabel's words is then somewhat ambiguous. We have seen common sense roundly reviled throughout the play: it is boring, deadening, and unattractive. A pessimistic reading of the line would hold that ordinary domestic life threatens to turn Mabel and Goring into ordinary adults. But an optimistic reading would argue that it isn't Mabel and Goring who are changing, but Lord Caversham.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, PART 1

The first act opens during a party at the Chilterns' house, a lovely, opulent home in a fashionable part of London. Lady Chiltern, a beautiful woman in her late twenties, is receiving her guests in stiff, formal manner at the top of a spiral staircase. Meanwhile, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon – two pretty, slightly affected young women – are sitting together on an antique sofa, complaining to each other about the dullness of society parties. They don't seem to mean anything they say; every well-turned phrase is only meant to delight and amuse. Their quick verbal play amounts to a dismissal of serious life purpose, marital fidelity, and sincere compliments.

The play begins in the middle of an extraordinary setting, filled with nearly priceless antiques and exquisitely beautiful women. But in the world of the play, it is an ordinary scene, perfectly representative of a certain lifestyle and worldview. The lifestyle is pleasure-seeking, and the worldview is one that always puts pleasure first. But it is an incredibly particular kind of pleasure. Its elaborateness, as seen in the women's tortuous wit, is its main reward.

Lord Caversham enters the party and asks after his son, Lord Goring. He complains about his son's leisurely, purposeless life, and Mabel Chiltern – Sir Chiltern's flower-like younger sister – jumps in to defend him. She notes that the demands of Goring's social obligations and intricate wardrobe keep him very busy. Lord Caversham dislikes London society, but Mabel observes cheerfully that "it is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics" – though she believes Lord Goring is something else entirely. Lord Caversham is pleased that the charming girl thinks well of his son, but he can't quite keep up with her banter.

The differences between Lord Caversham and his son Lord Goring are representative of a certain generational divide. Older people, like Lord Caversham and Lady Markby, seem incapable of understanding the younger people's beloved social games. But characters like Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern take their games very seriously. Lord Caversham cannot understand this mild oxymoron: his definitions of the serious and the trivial are very concrete and old-fashioned.

Two new guests enter: a nice older woman named Lady Markby, and a striking red-haired woman named Mrs. Cheveley, who has recently come from Vienna. Lady Chiltern realizes, with visible displeasure, that she went to school with the woman now named Mrs. Cheveley. Mrs. Cheveley takes note of Lady Chiltern's coldness, and mentions Sir Chiltern in a manner that seems at once jovial and vaguely threatening. She turns away to flirt with a man named Vicomte de Nanjac.

Right away, we can see that Mrs. Cheveley is also a woman who likes to play games. She is mysterious and allusive. But they are games of a different sort. Mabel's games, for example, are oblique but innocuous: their obliqueness is only meant to delight. Mrs. Cheveley's are oblique because they wish to conceal something, and to use that secret to her advantage.

ACT 1, PART 2

Sir Robert Chiltern enters the room – a handsome, worried-looking man in early middle age. He chats with Lady Markby, who offers to introduce him to her interesting new friend, Mrs. Cheveley. They talk pleasantly, though Mrs. Cheveley alludes a little condescendingly to Lady Chiltern's schoolgirl past, which was distinguished only by "good conduct." They exchange witticisms, mostly about Mrs. Cheveley's charm and her unwillingness to be classified – not because she believes in naturalness, which she thinks is merely "a difficult pose to keep up," but because women in general are mysterious. She does not believe that women should be romantic until late middle age, however.

In this scene, we learn a bit more about Mrs. Cheveley's ideas and values. To her, "good conduct" is something to be ashamed of, something worth mocking. Goodness, politeness, and obedience, are failures of imagination, symptoms of a boring and naïve worldview. Her sort of dandyism is amoral, or even anti-moral. Her preference for overtly artificial behavior is anti-moral as well, though there is no necessarily link between artificiality and amorality.

Sir Robert asks why Mrs. Cheveley has decided to visit London, and, in the midst of a flutter of verbal play, she mentions that she has come to ask Sir Robert for a favor. They discuss a deceased mutual friend named Baron Arnheim, whose name seems to cause Sir Robert some anxiety.

Mrs. Cheveley is setting the stage for a very unpleasant reveal. She is setting it with a lot of pleasure, a lot of artistry: she is evidently looking forward to a conversation that will be very painful for Robert.

The next guest to enter is Lord Goring, a handsome man over thirty. The stage notes specify that he is "a flawless dandy," and "fond of being misunderstood"; also that he, too, does not wish to be considered romantic until late middle age. Sir Robert introduces him to Mrs. Cheveley, but the two have met before. Mrs. Cheveley wanders off, and Lord Goring banters sweetly with Mabel Chiltern, who jokingly chides him for his "bad qualities," which, she implies are both too exposed and too hidden. Lord Goring asks Mabel about the interesting Mrs. Cheveley, implying that he once knew and admired her. Mabel acts charmingly jealous, and then leaves to talk to the Vicomte de Nanjac.

Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley both oddly protest against the idea of romance. They seem to think that romance is incompatible with youth, though they don't explain why – most likely, it seems too mushy, too dull, too sentimental, an artificial attempt to recreate the passions of youth. Both Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley value youth very highly, and have considered it very carefully. To them, the art of youth is precise and well-considered. In their obsession with youth, and their idea of youth as an art, both are archetypal dandies.

Lord Caversham walks up to his son, Lord Goring. He chides his son for his idle, pleasure-seeking lifestyle, but Lord Goring explains lightly that pleasure is all there is – "nothing ages like happiness." Lord Caversham calls him heartless, but Lord Goring gently waves off the accusation.

As we meet Lord Goring for the first time, he illustrates various aspects of dandyism. Preferring pleasure to happiness – or, rather, claiming to prefer it – is very much the attitude of the dandy. But it is only an attitude, and should be read as such.

Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont come to talk to Lord Goring. They are surprised to see him at a "political party," but he explains that no one ever talks about politics at political parties, and if anyone does, the trick is simply not to listen. The women complain charmingly about their husbands, who are too perfect and upstanding to be any fun, and gossip cattily about Mrs. Cheveley and her rapid entrance into London society.

Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are also dandies. Their dandyism mostly takes the form of contrariness. Almost everything they say is charmingly the opposite of what one would expect. The two women are pleasure-seekers, and they find the greatest pleasure in mildly socially subversive wit.

Mabel joins the conversation. Mrs. Marchmont remarks that she likes "looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people," and everyone seems to agree. Lord Goring walks away with Mabel, who complains that he has not been sufficiently attentive. The two society women walk to the dining room with the Vicomte; though they're hungry, they pretend they never eat.

Here, the two society ladies carry on being contrary. Mrs. Marchmont's quip seems frivolous, but is actually quite meaningful: she likes to observe the hidden, flawed, undeveloped aspects of people. When the two women pretend not to be hungry, they're actually mocking women who sincerely pretend never to eat.

ACT 1, PART 3

Mrs. Cheveley and Robert Chiltern walk into the living room as the others pass out. She tells him she wants to speak to him about the Argentine Canal Company, which, she says, is similar to the Suez Canal project he was once involved in. Robert explains that the Suez Canal was a worthwhile project, while the Argentine Canal is merely a hoax. Robert has organized a Commission to investigate it, and it has found the project to be fraudulent. Mrs. Cheveley explains that she invested very seriously in the Argentine Canal, on Baron Arnheim's advice.

When we first meet Robert in the first act, his primary quality is his moral conscience. The difference between right and wrong is quite clear to him; there is no gray area. If a project is found to be fraudulent, it is of no value, no matter how many friends have invested in it. His politics leave no room for shady compromises.

Sir Robert thinks the investment a bad one, and mentions that he is to give a report to the House of Commons about the Canal the following evening. To his shock, Mrs. Cheveley tells him that he must lie about the Commission's report and tell the House that the project is important and worthwhile. She offers to pay him, but he refuses her proudly. Suddenly, she reveals her trump card: she plans to blackmail him with a misdeed from his past. When he was very young, and a secretary to an important official, he sold a government secret: he advised Baron Arnheim to buy shares in the Suez Canal, knowing that the English government would invest heavily in it. If Sir Robert does not give a positive report to the House, says Mrs. Cheveley, she will disgrace him and ruin his career.

Robert's first response to Mrs. Cheveley's request is incomprehension. He has so carefully distanced himself from fraud and dishonesty, has taken such care to position himself as one who represents honesty and nobility, that he is almost unable to imagine fraud being thrust upon him. Yet his noble attitude is slightly hypocritical. His earlier crime at least partially disqualifies him from an attitude of such moral purity. When he is faced with evidence of his moral inconsistency, he is too shocked to react. He is not prepared to accept that his moral nature is complicated.

Robert is horrified and lost. He repeatedly refuses to do as Mrs. Cheveley asks, but he is also terrified by her threats: he wavers helplessly between bad and worse. He begs her for time, but she insists that he decide immediately. He finally consents to her demands and quickly leaves the room.

Mrs. Cheveley now forces Robert to choose between private and public disgrace. If he falsifies the report, he may be able to retain his position, but he will be burdened with guilt and self-hatred. At that moment, it seems the lesser of two evils.

Meanwhile, the other guests return from dinner. Lady Markby chatters pleasantly to Mrs. Cheveley about the noble, upstanding character of the Chilterns, then leaves with Lord Caversham. Meanwhile, Lady Chiltern approaches Mrs. Cheveley and asks her what business she had with her husband. Mrs. Cheveley hints that she has convinced Robert to make a positive report about the Argentine Canal, and invites Lady Chiltern to come hear the report with her the following evening. Lady Chiltern is shocked to hear that her husband has changed his mind about the scheme. Mrs. Cheveley leaves triumphantly; Lady Chiltern stands thinking carefully at the top of the staircase.

Lady Markby's comments about the Chilterns have a certain dramatic irony after the preceding scene. That is to say, they possess an added level of meaning for the reader, who, unlike Lady Markby, has just learned of Robert's capacity for dishonesty. We also learn that Lady Chiltern is just as ignorant of her own husband's past (and, by implication, moral complexity) as Lady Markby. Lady Chiltern idealizes her husband instead of knowing him in all his particularity.

Meanwhile, Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern flirt pleasantly in the living room. Mabel finds a diamond **brooch** or bracelet stuck between the couch cushions. Lord Goring asks if he may keep it for now, because he wishes to know who has lost it – he recognizes it, having given it to someone as a present years before. Lady Chiltern reenters the room. Mabel says her goodbyes and leaves; Lady Chiltern complains to Lord Goring about Mrs. Cheveley's scheming, and he says good night as well. He leaves just as Robert enters.

The conversations of dandies like Mrs. Marchmont and Mrs. Basildon are oblique and roundabout in their search for amusement and truth, and Lord Goring's tactics are similarly indirect. He does not simply hold up the brooch and ask to whom it belongs: he devises a plan to discover its owner. As we will see, such indirectness has its purpose.

Lady Chiltern asks Robert, with some distress, why he has agreed to support the Argentine Canal scheme. At school, she says, Mrs. Cheveley was known for lying and stealing, and for her generally unpleasant and unkind nature – he should not trust her. Guiltily, Robert explains that he has changed his mind about the Canal, that "public and private life are different things," and that politics are very complicated.

Like Sir Robert, Lady Chiltern makes clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad. Just as Robert finds no gray areas politically, Lady Chiltern finds no gray areas personally. Mrs. Cheveley steals and lies, is therefore bad, is therefore to be avoided: simple logic. Yet Robert's *logic seems to have suddenly become more forgiving.*

Lady Chiltern insists that they are not complicated – one must simply be honest and upstanding in all matters. She tells Robert that she loves him for his pure and honorable nature, and begs him not to compromise himself – otherwise, she cannot go on loving him. She convinces Robert to write to Mrs. Cheveley and retract his promise.

Lady Chiltern states directly that the entire basis of their marriage and their love is their matching moral purity. If this contract of purity is broken, the relationship will dissolve. Lady Chiltern believes that circumstances must always adhere to abstractions of goodness.

ACT 2, PART 1

The beginning of the second act takes place in Sir Robert Chiltern's morning-room, where Sir Robert and Lord Goring are discussing Robert's predicament. Goring tells Robert that he should have been completely honest with his wife, but Robert explains that if she knew the whole truth she would end their marriage, since she herself is perfect. Lord Goring decides to talk to Lady Chiltern, to try to alter her views on life and perfection.

Robert more or less explains the purity contract to Lord Goring. It seems to make Lord Goring sad and thoughtful – unlike his usual self. He finds its terms neither fair nor realistic. His comments imply that no one is perfect, not even Lady Chiltern. Moreover, he believes that perfection is not anything to be desired, especially in a marriage.

Sir Robert speaks resentfully of the shame that would befall him were his misdeed to become public, and complains that the act was essentially harmless; Lord Goring points out gently that the misdeed harmed *him*, above all. Sir Robert goes on trying to excuse himself: he claims that men should not be judged by youthful mistakes, and that it would have been impossible for him to succeed without the money he earned from the divulged secret. Lord Goring disagrees on every point. Ultimately, he implies, Robert betrayed his principles for money.

In trying to maintain his self-image as a morally faultless person – a person who does not allow for gray areas – Robert in fact creates gray areas where there are none. To remain morally faultless, Robert must redefine his actions as morally acceptable. In this way, the impulse to purity becomes paradoxical. It makes Robert blur his otherwise clear categories of right and wrong.

Robert reveals that it was Baron Arnheim that put the idea in his head. He describes an evening he spent with Baron Arnheim when he was very young. The Baron mesmerized him with beautiful speeches about power, which he considered the one thing truly worth having. Robert still sees the wisdom in this idea, though Lord Goring finds it "thoroughly shallow." Robert is torn between remorse and stubborn pride.

Such blurring is the origin of Robert's troubles. Baron Arnheim, from Robert's description, seems to have been proficient at sophistry – reasoning that is artful but false. Baron Arnheim used his rhetorical talent to convince his listeners that power is the only thing of value.

Finally, Robert asks his friend for advice. A confession, Lord Goring says, would ruin his career forever; what he must do now is tell his wife everything. Goring mentions that he was once briefly engaged to Mrs. Cheveley, and tells Robert that he must find a way to fight her, perhaps using some detail from her past. Robert takes only the second part of Goring's advice; he decides to write a telegram to an acquaintance in Vienna to inquire about Mrs. Cheveley's secrets or past embarrassments. Lord Goring notes cautiously that women like Mrs. Cheveley are not easily embarrassed – that they enjoy scandals.

Lord Goring enjoys pretense and games, and cultivates an appearance of triviality; Robert enjoys important political work, and cultivates an appearance of seriousness. Yet Lord Goring's actual moral base is much more solid that Robert's. Goring fully believes that it is wrong to sell government secrets, and right to be honest with one's wife – no two ways about it. The appearance of seriousness and the appearance of triviality do not necessarily correspond to underlying attitudes.

Lady Chiltern joins them; she has just come home from a meeting of the Women's Liberal Association, which advocates labor and women's rights. Lord Goring jokes that they must have thorough discussions of hats, and she scolds him good-humoredly. She leaves the room for a moment; Robert thanks Lord Goring warmly for his advice and leaves to do some work.

In fact, it is Lord Goring's belief that truth and appearance do not – or ought not – go hand in hand. That is why he returns again and again to an irreverent, joking attitude. He believes that such an attitude safeguards true moral seriousness. It also happens to be delightful, a value in its own right.

ACT 2, PART 2

Lady Chiltern reenters and sits down to talk to Lord Goring about her husband's mysterious dealings with Mrs. Cheveley. Awkwardly, Lord Goring tries to tell her to be a bit more merciful – to recognize that even the most upstanding people sometimes suffer moments of moral frailty. He tries to say that the world runs on love and charity, not on cold, abstract standards of right and wrong. He also tells her to come to him for help, if she ever needs it. Lady Chiltern half-discerns that he is alluding to her husband, but she cannot believe that Robert could ever do anything dishonest. She is amazed to hear Lord Goring speak so seriously; it is the first time she has heard him take such an undandylike attitude.

Lord Goring tries, finally, to explain his ideas about morality to Lady Chiltern. Ultimately, though, his ideas express more about his model of human nature – a changeable, unstable, various model, sensitive to the slightest impulses and held together by a frail structure perceived outwardly as "personality." This model of human nature is linked closely to the dandy's funny, inconsistent, inscrutable manner. The dandy refuses to participate in society's game of stable personalities.

Mabel Chiltern enters and forbids Lord Goring from acting seriously – it is "unbecoming." They make plans to go riding the following morning. As an afterthought, Lord Goring asks Lady Chiltern for a list of the guests from the previous night, and she tells him that he can obtain one from Tommy Trafford, a mutual acquaintance. Lord Goring says his goodbyes and walks out. Mabel complains to Lady Chiltern that Tommy Trafford proposes to her too often, and in very embarrassing fashion. She would never want to marry a man like Tommy, who has genius or an important career, because it would be dull – he would talk so much about his affairs. Mabel runs out, comes back in, and announces that Mrs. Cheveley is on her way.

The dull Tommy Trafford acts as a counterpart to Lord Goring. They are both Mabel's suitors, yet they come at courtship in very different ways. Tommy is straightforward, persistent, artless, and boring. Lord Goring is so roundabout and inscrutable in his flirtations that they hardly even seem like flirtations. Clearly, Mabel is more responsive to the latter strategy. She prefers Lord Goring's method because she, too, is a dandy. It is not a superficial similarity: they are alike not only in manner but in their ideas of human nature.

Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley enter. Mabel briefly says hello and runs off to pose in a tableau – a performance in which people pose as figures in a famous painting. Lady Markby explains that they have come to inquire about Mrs. Cheveley's missing diamond **brooch**, but Lady Chiltern does not know anything about it. Lady Markby uses the occasion to ramble about the degeneration of London society: it is too crowded, too modern, too "mixed," class-wise. She also complains about the trend in higher education for women, though on this point Lady Chiltern must respectfully disagree. Finally, Lady Markby complains about her over-politicized husband, and here Lady Chiltern disagrees once again – she enjoys talking about politics.

In this scene, Lady Markby helps to show the disparity between seriousness and the appearance of seriousness. So far, Lady Markby has seemed like a kindly, polite, dignified (if somewhat silly) older woman. But behind the appearance of kindly politeness is a tangle of prejudice and thoughtlessness. Lady Markby may seem to act "naturally," but her behavior is only a pose – and one that does not represent her beliefs. It's also important to note, in light of later events, that the author satirizes her narrow-mindedness regarding women.

The butler brings in tea, and Lady Markby rambles about family feuds. Mrs. Cheveley notes that parents nowadays must learn "the art of living" from their children – "the only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times." Soon Lady Markby says her goodbyes and leaves to make another social call, and Lady Chiltern invites Mrs. Cheveley to stay and talk.

Here, Lady Cheveley states one of the basic premises of dandyism. If life is an art, and art must delight and instruct, then one's manner of living should be delightful and thought-provoking. To this end, the dandies devote all their efforts at amusement.

As soon as Lady Markby leaves, Lady Chiltern drops all pretense of pleasantness. She tells Mrs. Cheveley that she does not wish to see her again socially: she doesn't want to receive anybody who has behaved as disgracefully as Mrs. Cheveley did in her youth. Mrs. Cheveley takes this very coolly; "morality is simply the attitude we adopt toward people whom we personally dislike," she says. But, she says, she has come to do Lady Chiltern a favor – to advise Lady Chiltern to convince her husband to keep his promise about the Argentine Canal. Lady Chiltern is outraged, and demands that Mrs. Cheveley leave her house at once.

Just as Goring, in his dandy-like way, believes that personhood is variable and unstable, Mrs. Cheveley believes that morality is subjective and variable– that there is no such thing as right and wrong. But the similarity is deceptive. Goring's dandyism does not imply that there is nothing worth valuing: we have seen him argue for understanding and forgiveness. Unlike Mrs. Cheveley, he thinks human relationships are of great value.

Just then, Robert walks in, Mrs. Cheveley announces triumphantly that Robert made his fortune by selling a government secret. After observing the impact of her announcement with satisfaction, she leaves the house. Robert admits that Mrs. Cheveley spoke the truth, and Lady Chiltern cries out that all their life together has been a lie. She loved him because he was good, honest, and idealistic, and now her love has been crushed; he is no longer her ideal. Despairingly, Robert tells her that people should love one another for both their flaws and their virtues; that it is wrong to make an ideal of the person one loves; and that love should be forgiving above all. He says that men love women for their flaws, but women put men on false pedestals. In preventing him from giving the dishonest report, he cries, she has ruined his life. He storms out, and Lady Chiltern bursts into tears.

The crisis that Mrs. Cheveley has brought on the Chilterns has exposed a significant difference between them. Robert – perhaps because of recent events – believes that a person is a composite of faults and virtues, a complicated and inconsistent entity. Lady Chiltern believes that people are either entirely bad, like Mrs. Cheveley, or entirely good, as she thought Robert once was. If he is not entirely good – if he has done a dishonest thing – he must be entirely bad. This scene shows that it is often crucial to possess a realistic, complicated idea of human nature; otherwise, we end up loving not people but ideas.

ACT 3, PART 1

The third act opens onto Lord Goring's library, where the impressively inscrutable butler named Phipps is tidying up some newspapers. Lord Goring walks in, dressed beautifully and expensively - "the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought." He asks Phipps for a change of **buttonhole** (a flower one wears on a suit jacket). Lord Goring speaks meditatively and slyly about the nature of fashion, politeness and truthfulness; he concludes that in all these matters, one's own person represents the good and others represent the bad ("falsehoods [are] the truth of other people.") As if to soothe a child, Phipps responds to each of these musings with a polite "Yes, my lord." Lord Goring examines his buttonhole, and decides that it is not trivial enough – it makes him look too much like an adult.

The quoted description of Lord Goring is both an amusing quip and a weighty comment on both clothing and philosophy. The quotation implies that people have generally considered serious thought incompatible with superficial aspects of beauty and pleasure, and that Lord Goring is the rare person that has reconciled the two. Why have people tended to separate them? Because many consider only "serious" matters, unearthly, metaphysical ideas, deserving of "serious" thought. Lord Goring believes that trivial, earthly things are equally deserving of serious thought.

Phipps hands Goring three letters and leaves the room. One letter is written on pink paper; it is a message from Lady Chiltern that reads: "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." She intends to arrive at ten that evening. Goring decides to cancel his previous evening plans and try to convince Lady Chiltern to forgive Robert, since every woman should stand by her husband.

Lord Goring's ideas about love and forgiveness are explicitly gendered. He states that women, in particular, must be forgiving and loving. Yet his statements seem to be more gendered than his actions. Based on his interactions with Robert, one could argue that his beliefs apply equally to men.

Just then, Lord Caversham enters. For Lord Goring, it is a very inconvenient time. Lord Caversham intends to have a serious talk with his son, but Lord Goring explains that he "only talk[s] seriously on the first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven." Lord Caversham waves aside his son's jokes and announces that he must get married, and right away – he should follow Sir Robert's example. He is already thirty-four, after all – though here Goring interrupts to say that he always claims to be thirty two. They briefly discuss paradoxes of personality – Goring quipping and playing, Lord Caversham confused and cranky – and then Goring suggests that they move into the smoking-room, which is less drafty.

We have said that Lord Goring does not believe that talking seriously and thinking seriously are equivalent, or even much related. But we can still ask the question: why avoid talking seriously? After all, it doesn't necessarily hinder serious thought. Lord Caversham is a good illustration of the dangers of talking seriously. When Lord Caversham makes a humorless statement about right and wrong, its humorlessness (seriousness) is a symptom of narrow-mindedness, of imaginative stiffness and prejudice.

His father walks ahead into the room. Lord Goring takes Phipps aside and tells him that a lady is coming to visit him that evening, and instructs him to take her into the drawing room when she arrives. The bell rings, but Lord Goring must rush off to join his father. Soon Mrs. Cheveley walks into the library, radiant and splendidly dressed. She looks into the drawing-room with a proprietary air, as though planning to redecorate; she even asks Phipps to change the lampshades. She is surprised to hear from Phipps that Lord Goring was expecting her, and then assumes that he was expecting another woman – a secret lover, perhaps. She glances at the table and recognizes Lady Chiltern's handwriting; she reads the letter and takes it as proof that Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring are having an affair. Phipps comes in from the drawing-room, and she hides the letter under a book on the table.

Mrs. Cheveley believes that moral codes are completely empty – that there is nothing actually of value that morality protects. She wears this attitude with an air of superiority, as though she has risen above a mass delusion. She believes the attitude affords her a special insight into people's actions and motivations. But in this scene, it becomes clear that her viewpoint actually limits her understanding. Because she believes that all moral attitudes are only theatrical displays, she is unable to understand behaviors that truly are morally grounded. For this reason, she misreads both Goring (in expecting him to marry her) and Lady Chiltern (in interpreting her letter as proof of infidelity.)

Suddenly, Lord Goring and Lord Caversham walk back into the library, and Mrs. Cheveley hides in the drawing-room. Father and son are still discussing marriage. Lord Caversham explains that the choice of wife should fall to him, because "there is property at stake" – "marriage is a matter for common sense." Lord Goring objects that women with common sense are "curiously plain." As is his habit, Lord Caversham calls his son "heartless," and Lord Goring politely disagrees.

The question of Lord Goring's "heartlessness" is central to the play. In Wilde's time, dandyism and aestheticism were considered destructive and amoral. The play makes a strong case to the contrary. Lord Goring believes that common sense is "plain" because it is prejudiced and narrow-minded, and therefore ugly: its ugliness lies in its untruth.

Just then, Sir Robert walks in. He tells Goring despairingly that Mrs. Cheveley has revealed his shameful secret to his wife. He has also learned that Mrs. Cheveley is more or less untouchable in Vienna, because Baron Arnheim left her most of his fortune. Lord Goring takes Phipps aside and tells him that he must change his instructions regarding the lady visitor: when she comes, Phipps must turn her away. Phipps replies that the lady is already here, waiting in the drawing-room. In some confusion, Lord Goring returns to Sir Robert, who begs him for advice. He has realized, he says, that "love is the great thing" – not ambition. Lady Chiltern, Robert says, has never done anything dishonorable, and Robert is afraid that she will leave him. Lord Goring assures Robert that she will forgive him.

What is the meaning of Robert's realization? He has come to believe that one's relationships with other people matter more than personal gain: the simple foundation of most moral codes. Lord Goring has helped Robert arrive at this conclusion, and behind Goring's dandyism is the same simple belief in human relationships. No matter how heartless he may seem to some, Lord Goring has taken it upon himself to champion the very center of moral life. But his moral quality is obscured to people like Lord Caversham, who conflate manner with belief.

ACT 3, PART 2

Suddenly, Robert hears a noise in the drawing-room. Goring assures him there's no one, but Robert feels apprehensive and decides to look for himself. When he looks into the drawing room, he sees Mrs. Cheveley; Goring, however, thinks that the woman waiting there is Lady Chiltern. In the conversation that follows, they are referring to two different people. Robert attacks Mrs. Cheveley, and Goring defends Lady Chiltern. Robert assumes Goring is scheming with Mrs. Cheveley, and storms out angrily.

Robert's state of crisis causes him to fail in his moral judgment, just as Mrs. Cheveley failed. He assumes the worst of his friend Goring, because he has not adequately understood Goring's moral grounding. This misunderstanding is a moment of comic relief, but it also shows that it's important to understand underlying moral codes.

A content-looking Mrs. Cheveley enters the library. Lord Goring is shocked to see her. He tells her he wants to give her some advice, but she jokingly brushes him off and reroutes the conversation onto the subject of fashion; "a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker," she announces. Lord Goring guesses that she has come to sell him Sir Robert's incriminating letter. She vaguely confirms his guess and begins talking about their earlier short-lived romance, which ended when Goring saw her flirting with another man. She tells him she loved him, and he responds that she is "far too clever to know anything about love."

Like Goring, Mrs. Cheveley believes in the significance of fashion. But Goring would never place fashion above morality, as Mrs. Cheveley does. That is the main difference between them. Mrs. Cheveley does not perceive this difference, because she is "too clever" to understand the difference between actual and superficial moral codes. Of course, her cleverness is not true *cleverness – it is another form of narrow-mindedness. Lord Goring gets at a truth by jokingly saying its opposite.*

Finally, Mrs. Cheveley speaks openly: she will give him Robert's letter if he agrees to marry her. Lord Goring waves her off, expressing his dislike and contempt for her almost involuntarily. She speaks dismissively about Robert and spitefully about Lady Chiltern, whom she claims to hate deeply. Lord Goring says that Robert's youthful mistake does not reflect "his true character," which is noble. Mrs. Cheveley accepts Lord Goring's refusal to marry her with relative composure, and gets ready to leave. Goring tries to convince her to leave Robert in peace, but she is determined to bring about his ruin.

Mrs. Cheveley feels contempt for Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern because their behavior – its air of moral grace – seems to her naïve and simplistic. We can infer that her understanding (which seems to her more realistic and more truthful) is founded on an idea of human nature that is unreliable and selfish, a sort of modern correction to morality. Yet her view of personhood is not more broad-minded: it simply replaces one set of "fundamental" human qualities (goodness, love) with another (selfishness, coldness).

Lord Goring tells her that her malice toward Lady Chiltern is unforgivable. Mrs. Cheveley replies that her goal is not to torment Lady Chiltern; she only visited her, she says, to ask about a missing **brooch**. At this, Lord Goring lifts said brooch from a drawer and clasps it around her wrist as a bracelet. The bracelet was a gift from Lord Goring to his cousin Mary, from whom Mrs. Cheveley stole it years ago. Horrified, she tries to get the brooch off her wrist, but to no avail: as Lord Goring knows, it has a very tricky mechanism.

Mrs. Cheveley has been implying all along that morality is entirely illusory, a ghost everyone pretends to see but that vanishes easily under more skeptical scrutiny. In a way, then, this bracelet is the ghost suddenly becoming real, rigid and inflexible. The bracelet is like a scarlet letter branding her with her crimes. Mrs. Cheveley's youthful crime does reflect her character, as Robert's does not.

Lord Goring tells Mrs. Cheveley he will now call the police. Only on one condition will he refrain from calling: if she gives him Robert's incriminating letter. Anguished and terrified, Mrs. Cheveley hands it over. Then she remembers Lady Chiltern's letter – the one she considers proof of Lady Chiltern's infidelity. She asks Goring to get her some water, and while he's out of the room she snatches the letter from under a book, where she had hidden it earlier that evening. When he returns, she announces triumphantly that she is in possession of Lady Chiltern's "love letter", and that she intends to give it to Robert post haste. Before Lord Goring has a chance to intervene, she rings for Phipps to show her out.

Mrs. Cheveley has consistently feigned perfect composure. But when the bracelet clasps around her wrist, her composure disintegrates: she cannot stop herself from showing that the situation is a serious matter for her. Dandies like Lord Goring make it a point never to be serious about "serious" adult matters like money and reputation, but Mrs. Cheveley is ultimately concerned precisely with these dull things, like the red-faced banker in The Little Prince. In a way, dandyism is a variation on Peter Pan Syndrome—the resolve to never grow up.

ACT 4, PART 1

The fourth act takes place in Sir Robert's morning-room, where Lord Goring waits restlessly to share his news. A servant comes in to tell him that Sir Robert is at work, Lady Chiltern is still in her room, and Mabel Chiltern has just come home from a morning outing. The servant also says that Lord Caversham is waiting in the library, and that he is aware of Lord Goring's visit; Lord Goring asks the servant to tell his father that he has already left. But in a minute Lord Caversham enters and immediately begins scolding his son for his idleness and bachelorhood. Lord Goring promises to be engaged before lunch. "Never know whether you are serious or not," says Lord Caversham; "neither do I," Lord Goring replies.

For Lord Caversham, the categories "serious" and "trivial" align, in a vague way, with the categories "good" and "bad" as well as the categories "natural" and "unnatural." In other words, he believes it is good and natural to behave seriously, and bad and unnatural to behave trivially. Lord Caversham takes all this for granted. Yet there is no particular reason for these associations – no reason other than convention. Lord Goring is wise enough not to attempt to convince his father otherwise.

Lord Caversham brusquely changes the subject. He informs his son that Lord Chiltern has been highly praised for his speech against the Argentine Canal: *The Times* has honored him for his upstanding political career. Caversham tells his son to go into politics, and then once again tells him to marry. Goring explains that he is too young for such dull things; when his father says that he "hate[s] this affectation of youth," Goring replies: "Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art."

Earlier, we briefly compared dandyism to Peter Pan Syndrome – the resolve to never grow up. (J.M. Barrie's play, incidentally, premiered in London about a decade after Wilde's.) But here Goring indicates the primary difference between the two mindsets: Peter Pan's adherents believe that youth is the most natural state, but dandies know it is a chosen attitude, a performance.

Mabel Chiltern comes in. She pointedly ignores Lord Goring, and asks Lord Caversham sympathetically about Lady Caversham's hats, which she seems to consider a sort of illness. After Lord Goring greets her loudly several times, she explains that she refuses to speak to him – after all, he stood her up that very morning. Lord Goring is genuinely upset to hear it, since he truly enjoys talking to her. "I never believe a single word that either you or I say to each other," she replies. She complains to Lord Caversham that Lord Goring cannot be influenced; as is his habit, he replies that his son is heartless. In a minute, Lord Caversham leaves.

Here, Mabel and Lord Goring almost have a spat – almost. But their odd sense of humor seems to keep them hovering just above it, as though they're really just gently mocking spats and the people who have them. The little oxymoron in their conversation – "I love talking to you," "we never mean what we say" – is an oxymoron only on the surface. In fact, Mabel implies that they love talking to each other precisely because they never mean what they say, because they avoid seriousness.

Mabel continues to prod Lord Goring about their missed date, but he charms her out of her ill spirits. He prepares to ask for her hand in marriage; she guesses his intentions, and confides that it is her second of the day – the annoying Tommy Trafford proposed to her earlier that morning. Little by little, via a series of imaginative twists and turns, they confess their love for one another and determine to marry as soon as possible.

Compare Lord Caversham's approach to Lord Goring's. Lord Caversham says to his son: "You must be this and you must be that!" – an apparently ineffective approach. Lord Goring does not tell Mabel to be in a good mood, and he does not tell her to marry him – he just makes it so. In this, he is a fine artist in Mrs. Cheveley's sense.

Lady Chiltern walks into the room, and Mabel leaves them to speak in private. Lord Goring tells Lady Chiltern that Mrs. Cheveley gave him the incriminating letter, and that he has burned it. He also admits that Mrs. Cheveley stole Lady Chiltern's letter from his drawing room, and now plans to mail it to Robert as proof of infidelity. Lady Chiltern is horrified. Lord Goring suggests that she tell Robert the truth, but instead she resolves to find a way to keep the letter from Robert.

This scene echoes an earlier conversation between Lord Goring and Sir Robert. At the beginning of the second act, Goring advised Robert to tell his wife the truth about a letter. Now, he advises Lady Chiltern to tell her husband the truth about a letter. But neither of the Chilterns trusts the other enough to come clean. They are inexperienced with forgiveness.

ACT 4, PART 2

Robert walks in with the pink letter in his hands. Because the letter is not addressed, he assumes the letter is meant for him. He is overjoyed by his wife's expression of love and trust, and she decides not to correct him. Lord Goring discreetly leaves the room. Robert tells Lady Chiltern that he no longer fears public disgrace, because he has her love. She happily informs him that Mrs. Cheveley gave his incriminating letter to Lord Goring: Robert is safe. He is overwhelmed by relief. He wonders whether he should retire from politics to amend for past mistakes, and Lady Chiltern encourages him to do so wholeheartedly.

Only a little while earlier, Robert assumed the worst of his friend Goring due to a misunderstanding. But he does not make the same mistake here: he assumes the best about his wife. And, on her end, Lady Chiltern realizes that she could have trusted her husband with the truth. At the beginning of the play, they were as distant and formal with one another as business associates. With Lord Goring's help, they've learned to rely on one another.

Lord Goring comes back into the room, and Robert thanks him effusively. A servant comes in to announce Lord Caversham's entrance. Lord Caversham congratulates Robert on his speech and tells him that Robert has been elected to a seat in the Cabinet. Robert is delighted by the news, but he tells Lord Caversham, with just a hint of regret, that he cannot accept the seat – he has decided to retire. Husband and wife leave to write a letter declining the position.

Robert is sincere in his desire to make things right with regard to the dishonest letter. But insofar as morality is simply an attitude that values personal relationships over most other concerns, it is not especially moral to resign – it does not benefit anyone. Robert's unwillingness to resign is not a sign of moral flimsiness.

Goring sends his father to speak to Mabel in the conservatory. Meanwhile, Lady Chiltern reenters the room. Goring scolds her for encouraging Robert to decline the seat. She should not continue to punish him for the mistakes of his youth, he says; she should help him live the kind of life he wants – a busy, satisfying political life. That is her duty as his wife. "A man's life is of more value than a woman's," he says; a man's life is intellectual, and a woman's life is emotional. She should not prevent her husband from leading the life he was destined for.

In fact, resigning would do nothing except hurt Robert. Though such an act has an appearance of "high moral tone," as Goring calls it, it is essentially morally neutral. But it is wrong, and not neutral, for Lady Chiltern to encourage Robert to resign. She is encouraging him to sacrifice his own happiness at the altar of propriety (convention disguised as morality).

Robert comes in, carrying his letter of resignation. Lady Chiltern reads it and rips it up. Using Lord Goring's own words, she tells Robert that she does not want him to sacrifice his career, and that it is her duty as a woman to forgive him – "that is how women help the world." Robert thanks Goring for all he's done. In return, Goring asks Robert for his sister Mabel's hand in marriage. At first Robert does not grant it, thinking that Goring is in love with Mrs. Cheveley. But Lady Chiltern explains the whole misunderstanding – Goring was waiting for her, and not Mrs. Cheveley, the previous night – and Robert happily gives his blessing. Robert realizes the pink letter was meant for Lord Goring; as a symbolic gesture, Lady Chiltern writes Robert's name in at the top of the letter.

It is clear, from this scene, that Lady Chiltern has learned to trust her husband a little better, because she does not hesitate to tell him the (potentially alarming) truth about the letter. Trust enables her to act selflessly in order to help her friend. The troubling implication of Lord Goring's advice is that men achieve things, and women help men to achieve things. It is an explicitly sexist assertion, but one that is tempered by historical context. In turn-of-the-century England, when women did not even have the right to vote, women had few opportunities for independent achievement.

Lord Caversham and Mabel Chiltern enter the room. Lord Caversham is shocked and delighted by the news of the engagement, and also by Robert's change of heart about the Cabinet seat. He threatens to cut Goring off if he is not "an ideal husband" to Mabel, but Mabel interjects to say that she would not like such a husband - she would rather be "a real wife." Everyone but Robert happily leaves the room to go to lunch. A few minutes later Lady Chiltern comes looking for him. They promise to love one another, and to hold love above all things.

Men and women, in this play, constantly match wits – evidently, Wilde did not believe women were less intellectually capable. Perhaps if he had written about a society which offered equal opportunities to men and women, he would have portrayed love and marriage as a relation of equality as well: both husband and wife striving to be "real," professionally happy, and mutually forgiving.

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