Lady Windermere's Fan

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 to parents who were both writers: his mother was a poet, and his father was a scholar as well as a prominent surgeon. As a young adult, Wilde attended a series of elite British educational institutions, where he excelled as a poet and scholar. By the early 1880s, Wilde was well known in London's literary and artistic circles as a clever, flamboyant individual with a passion for aesthetics and art. He was also a prolific journalist during this period. In 1884, he married Constance Lloyd, with whom he had two children. Wilde wrote and published most of his most prominent work in the last ten years of his life, including the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the early 1890s, Wilde was charged with sodomy due to rumors of his relationship with the young nobleman Lord Alfred Douglas and was ultimately sentenced to two years of hard labor. The only work Wilde completed after his imprisonment was a treatise on inhumane jail conditions, and he died suddenly in 1900 of meningitis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like Wilde's other comedic plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is deeply rooted in the upper-class English society of the late Victorian era. The play satirizes the hypocrisy of this society by revealing how shallow its outwardly strict moral rules really are. In particular, Wilde's work interrogates and exposes the real-life gender expectations and imbalances of the world in which he lived. This aspect of the work may have been informed by his own homosexuality, which was considered scandalous at time and even led to Wilde's imprisonment. Additionally, this work is related to Wilde's passionate commitment to the Aesthetic movement of the late Victorian era. Following the core tenet of "art for art's sake," participants in this movement believed that art could and should exist on its own aesthetic merit, rather than needing to fulfill a social or political purpose. While *Lady Windermere's Fan* is certainly grounded in social issues, its exuberant wit and carefully honed dialogue also suggest Wilde's commitment to the pure aesthetic joy of his craft.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although Wilde wrote three previous plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was his first play to see commercial and critical success. As such, it laid the groundwork for his other successful comedic plays to come, most notably *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both of those later works satirize upper-class English society and its morality in much the same way that *Lady Windermere's Fan* does. This play is also related to other stage dramas of the same era. In particular, it echoes the themes of Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, *A Doll's House*, in which a woman in a rigid society leaves her husband to pursue independence. Notably, however, Ibsen's play is dark and dramatic, where Wilde treats similar themes as light and comedic. Wilde's work is also connected to that of his contemporaries and mentors in the Aesthetic movement. In particular, he cited the writing of Walter Pater as crucial in his understanding of art and its aesthetic value.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Lady Windermere's Fan*
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** The Lake District of northern England
- **When Published:** 1893 (first performed 1892)
- **Literary Period:** Late Victorian period
- **Genre:** Comedic drama; melodrama
- **Setting:** London, England, circa 1892
- **Climax:** Mrs. Erlynne reveals that she has been hiding in Lord Darlington's apartment.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Erlynne; oppressive societal rules
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's in a Name? Wilde borrowed several names in the play from the Lake District where he wrote it. For example, Windermere is a nearby lake.

Sexism in Science. A form of bacterial lung infection was nicknamed "Lady Windermere Syndrome" when the scientists who first documented it hypothesized that a fastidious Victorian woman like Lady Windermere might have been prone to developing it. The reasoning behind this claim was that voluntarily suppressing coughing might cause the infection, and a woman like Lady Windermere would have avoided coughing in order to seem perfectly ladylike. Many scholars have since criticized this nickname as inaccurate and sexist.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens as a young woman, Lady Windermere, arranges **roses** in her morning-room in London. Her butler, Parker, announces that Lord Darlington has arrived to see her, and she

permits him to come in, emphasizing that any guests are welcome to visit. Lord Darlington enters and admires Lady Windermere's beautiful **fan**, which she says was a birthday gift from her husband. The party she's throwing that evening is in fact in honor of her birthday. Lady Windermere then chastises him for giving her so many effusive compliments and tells him that she thinks he pretends to be a very bad man when he's actually a very good one. Lord Darlington goes on to tease Lady Windermere about her rigid ideas of morality and says that he wishes for them to be very good friends. She defends her views and emphasizes that bad people should never be forgiven for their mistakes.

Parker announces that the Duchess of Berwick and her daughter Agatha have also arrived to visit. After bantering a bit with the women, Lord Darlington exits. The Duchess then reveals the real reason for her visit: she's come to tell Lady Windermere about rumors that her husband, Lord Windermere, has been frequently visiting and even making payments to a scandalous woman named Mrs. Erlynne. The Duchess says that all the men in London society—even her own brother, Augustus—are enamored of Mrs. Erlynne, despite her mysterious past and lack of family connections. Lady Windermere refuses to believe that her husband would do such a thing, but the Duchess insists that it's true and advises her to take Lord Windermere out of town to distract him. The Duchess and Agatha—who has barely said a word the entire time—exit.

Alone, Lady Windermere discovers, to her dismay, a locked bank book that turns out to hold proof of her husband's payments to Mrs. Erlynne. Lord Windermere enters and she confronts him, but he swears that she's misunderstanding the situation. Lady Windermere refuses to listen and says that she feels bitterly betrayed. At his point, Lord Windermere confesses that he needs a favor from her: he wants her to invite Mrs. Erlynne to the party so that she can be accepted back into polite society. He says that Mrs. Erlynne has made mistakes in the past but deserves this second chance. Horrified, Lady Windermere refuses, at which point Lord Windermere sends the invitation himself. Lady Windermere swears that if Mrs. Erlynne does come, she'll hit her across the face with the fan. Alone at the end of the act, Lord Windermere despairingly wonders what to do, since knowing Mrs. Erlynne's real identity would be devastating to Lady Windermere.

The second act opens on the party that same evening. Guests arrive, including Dumby, Cecil Graham, Lady Plymdale, and the Duchess and Agatha. Lord Darlington is also in attendance, along with Augustus, who takes Lord Windermere aside to ask his advice: Augustus is in love with Mrs. Erlynne, but doesn't know what to do given her lack of family relations. He's relieved to hear that she'll be at the party; everyone recognizes that an association with Lady Windermere marks one as respectable. Eventually, Mrs. Erlynne arrives, looking glamorous. Lady Windermere drops her fan in shock and greets Mrs. Erlynne politely. Then, calling herself a coward, she exits with Lord Darlington. The other guests gossip excitedly about Mrs. Erlynne, who quickly ingratiates herself with them; she charms Cecil Graham's respectable aunt Lady Jedburgh and spends her time dancing with Lord Windermere in order to make Augustus jealous.

Meanwhile, Lady Windermere confesses her distress to Lord Darlington, telling him how betrayed she feels by Lord Windermere and saying that she does need a friend after all. Lord Darlington says that she can't stay with a husband who treats her so disrespectfully, and when she agrees that that might be true, he confesses his love for her. She is horrified, telling him that she can't possibly run away with him. Disappointed by her rejection, Lord Darlington leaves, saying that he's departing England in the morning and won't see her again.

The party winds down, with many of the guests expressing their admiration of the charming Mrs. Erlynne. Agatha gets engaged to Mr. Hopper, to the Duchess's delight. It also becomes clear that Augustus has proposed and Mrs. Erlynne is planning to accept; she takes Lord Windermere aside to ask him about the money that he's promised to give her for her marriage. Watching them walk away together, Lady Windermere is furious and humiliated. She decides that she was wrong to turn Lord Darlington down and writes a letter to Lord Windermere, telling him that she's leaving. After she exits, Mrs. Erlynne finds and reads the letter and exclaims in dismay that history seems to be repeating itself; she once wrote a similar letter to Lady Windermere's father. Keeping the letter, she tells Lord Windermere that Lady Windermere has gone to bed. Then, she takes Augustus aside and says that if he wants her to accept his proposal, he'll need to take Lord Windermere out to the club and keep him busy.

The third act opens with Lady Windermere alone in Lord Darlington's rooms, miserably wondering if she's doing the right thing. She is astonished when Mrs. Erlynne enters and begs her to return home to her husband. Lady Windermere angrily refuses, saying that she might have if it weren't so infuriating to see Mrs. Erlynne again. Mrs. Erlynne continues to plead, insisting that Lord Windermere loves Lady Windermere and that her life will be ruined if she runs away with Lord Darlington. Lady Windermere continues to refuse, but she finally gives in when Mrs. Erlynne makes an emotional appeal to Lady Windermere's role as a mother and to her love for her young son. The two prepare to leave, but then they hear men's voices approaching. Mrs. Erlynne tells Lady Windermere to hide and they both conceal themselves.

Lord Darlington enters with Augustus, Lord Windermere, Dumby, and Cecil Graham. They lament that the club made them leave, while Lord Windermere tries to tell Augustus that he has to go home. Augustus insists that Lord Windermere stay

and the conversation turns to Augustus's love for Mrs. Erlynne. They argue about whether or not she's wicked, what her lack of family relations means, and whether the difference between good and wicked women even matters. Cecil notes that women will always think men are bad, with which Lord Darlington passionately agrees; he confesses to being in love with a "good woman" who won't have him. Moments later, Cecil notices a fan—Lady Windermere's—lying on the sofa and points it out, laughing that Darlington has talked of love while hiding a woman the whole time. Lord Windermere recognizes the fan and furiously asks Lord Darlington what's going on, threatening to search the rooms. Just then, Mrs. Erlynne bursts out and apologizes for taking the fan accidentally from the party. While the men are distracted by Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere slips out unnoticed.

The fourth act begins the following day with Lady Windermere again alone in her morning-room. She feels that she must tell Lord Windermere what happened and dreads doing so, thinking that talking about it will be even worse than experiencing it. Lord Windermere enters and tells her she was right about Mrs. Erlynne. Lady Windermere protests that Mrs. Erlynne isn't actually a bad person and says she has to tell him something, but he cuts her off, saying that she should stop worrying about Mrs. Erlynne and focus on their upcoming trip to the countryside. Lady Windermere remarks that good and bad people are really much harder to distinguish than she once thought.

Parker enters and announces that Mrs. Erlynne has brought the fan back, and Lady Windermere—over Lord Windermere's protests—asks Parker to send Mrs. Erlynne inside. Mrs. Erlynne arrives and apologizes for accidentally taking the fan, then announces that she's going to be moving away from England. She asks for a photograph of Lady Windermere and her baby to remember them by, and Lady Windermere leaves to get one. Lord Windermere angrily accuses Mrs. Erlynne of blackmailing him and says that he plans to tell Lady Windermere the truth: Mrs. Erlynne is really Lady Windermere's mother, whom she thinks is dead, and she exploited Lord Windermere's love for his wife in order to get him to help her back into polite society. Mrs. Erlynne admits to taking advantage of her daughter's wealthy husband but refuses to apologize; she simply took the opportunity she saw. She also tells him that if he tells Lady Windermere the truth, she'll make her own reputation so horrible that Lady Windermere will be miserable forever. Lord Windermere is disgusted, but Mrs. Erlynne maintains that she loves her daughter and, though she doesn't want to play the role of mother, she wants to protect her from pain by concealing the truth.

Lady Windermere returns with the photograph. Mrs. Erlynne notes that Lady Windermere seems very fond of her deceased mother, and Lady Windermere confirms that her mother is the priceless ideal she always tries to live up to. Lord Windermere goes to call Mrs. Erlynne's carriage and the two women share a tender moment alone. Lady Windermere still wants to tell Lord Windermere the truth, but Mrs. Erlynne convinces her not to, saying that she should always prioritize her happy marriage and her role as a mother. She also asks if she can keep the fan and Lady Windermere happily agrees, noting how fortunate it is that the two of them share the same first name, Margaret.

Augustus arrives just as Mrs. Erlynne is leaving and she asks him to walk her out, bidding Lord and Lady Windermere goodbye as she goes. Alone, Lord and Lady Windermere confirm their love for each other and look forward to seeing the roses at their house in the country. Augustus returns and startles them by saying that Mrs. Erlynne has told him everything: she only went to Lord Darlington's the previous night to look for Augustus, because she wanted to accept his proposal. Delighted, Augustus tells them that the two are engaged and will be moving away from England together right away. Lord Windermere tells him that he's marrying "a very clever woman" and Lady Windermere adds that she's "a very good woman."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lady Windermere – Lady Windermere is the play's protagonist. She is 21 years old and has been married for two years to Lord Windermere, with whom she has a six-month-old son. Lady Windermere adores her husband and reveres the memory of her mother, whom she believes died when Lady Windermere was a baby. She is unaware that Mrs. Erlynne is actually her mother, though Lord Windermere does know. Lady Windermere is well-respected in London society and has a reputation for only associating with respectable people, though it seems that she has few—if any—genuine friends. Over the course of the play, she comes to believe that her husband is cheating on her with Mrs. Erlynne and almost runs away with Lord Darlington, only to be saved by Mrs. Erlynne just before making this potentially disastrous decision. At the start of the play, she has very rigid views on morality and believes that all people are either good or bad, but as the play unfolds, she grows more and more uncertain of how good and evil play out in the real world. In particular, her experiences with Mrs. Erlynne show her that the same person can be both wicked and good. Lady Windermere's confusion and dawning understanding of morality's ambiguity serves as the primary illustration of one of the story's key themes. Additionally, her beautiful **fan** and the different ways it is used throughout the text provide a symbolic lens through which to view the play's themes of femininity and performed gender.

Lord Windermere – Lord Windermere is Lady Windermere's husband. He is a wealthy and respectable gentleman who

seems to be well-liked, and he treats his wife lovingly. However, he deceives her when he begins financially supporting Mrs. Erlynne, even though he does so out of love for Lady Windermere. Lord Windermere knows that Mrs. Erlynne is actually Lady Windermere's mother, and he believes that Lady Windermere would want her beloved mother to be happy and socially respectable if she knew the truth. At the start of the play, he has a more nuanced view of morality than his wife does, since he believes that Mrs. Erlynne deserves a second chance despite her past mistakes. However, he becomes more convinced of her wickedness throughout, Mrs. Erlynne's ruthless (and successful) attempts to manipulate him become infuriating to him, while her appearance in Lord Darlington's rooms suggests that she's having an affair with him and convinces Lord Windermere that she's just as wicked as her reputations indicates. (Unbeknownst to Lord Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne only went to Lord Darlington's quarters to keep Lady Windermere from foolishly running away with him.) Throughout the play, Lord Windermere seems to try consistently to behave morally, but his attempts often lead to confusion and misunderstanding. It's also notable that he gives Lady Windermere her **fan**, and his devotion to treating her as a model of conventional femininity is part of what leads to trouble in their marriage.

Mrs. Erlynne – Mrs. Erlynne is a mysterious woman who is new to London society. Though the play implies that she's probably in her late thirties, she looks much younger and is admired by all the men in London society, even though she lacks respectable family relations and there are all kinds of scandalous rumors about her past. She gains social acceptance when she attends Lady Windermere's party and charms the guests, and she eventually becomes engaged to Augustus. Toward the end of the play, the audience learns that she is actually Lady Windermere's mother, and that she abandoned her child to pursue a lover, who eventually abandoned Mrs. Erlynne herself. When she found out that her daughter had married the wealthy Lord Windermere, she began demanding money from him since she knew that he wouldn't want to hurt Lady Windermere by revealing Mrs. Erlynne's true identity. In the end, she succeeds in using this connection to Lord Windermere to regain entrance into polite society. Mrs. Erlynne is the play's starkest example of moral ambiguity, since she acts selflessly at times while also refusing to apologize for her past mistakes and opportunistic behavior. She keeps Lady Windermere's **fan** at the end of the play, which shows symbolically how she ultimately masters using femininity and gender roles to create the reality she wants.

Lord Darlington – Lord Darlington is a young gentleman who is generally believed to behave wickedly, though Lady Windermere thinks he's only pretending to be bad. Lord Darlington is playful and flirtatious and holds a flexible view of morality; in the first act, he tells Lady Windermere that he thinks her views are too black-and-white. Lord Darlington asks Lady Windermere to be his friend, but, when she asks for help in her distress over Lord Windermere, he confesses his love for her and asks her to run away with him. Lady Windermere refuses but later regrets her choice when she sees Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne talking intimately, which convinces her further that her husband is being unfaithful. This misunderstanding leads to a dramatic series of misunderstandings in Lord Darlington's apartment. Lord Darlington's love for Lady Windermere is presented as genuine and romantic, but also unrealistic; the audience can see that he simply bends his ideas of what's right to accommodate his own desires. Mrs. Erlynne is caught hiding in Lord Darlington's apartment at the end of the third act, but the play does not make it clear what happens to him as a result of the seeming affair. In reality, Mrs. Erlynne only went to Lord Darlington's apartment to stop Lady Windermere from leaving Lord Windermere, but this truth isn't apparent to Darlington and the other men; Darlington honestly doesn't have any idea what she's doing there. Presumably, Lord Darlington leaves England at the end of the play as he told Lady Windermere he intended to do.

The Duchess of Berwick – The Duchess of Berwich is a respectable older woman and friend of Lady Windermere's. She is Agatha's mother and Augustus's sister. In the first two acts, the Duchess serves as a comedic representation of the expectations of polite society, especially as it concerns women's roles. She is preoccupied with presenting herself and her daughter in a positive light, and she seems to use Lady Windermere more as a means to social gain than as an actual friend. The Duchess loves to gossip and tells Lady Windermere about the rumors surrounding Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne, thus setting into motion the central misunderstanding that drives the plot. The Duchess also succeeds in getting Agatha engaged to Mr. Hopper at the party.

Augustus – Augustus (nicknamed Tuppy) is an older gentleman and the brother of the Duchess of Berwick. It's implied that he's likeable but buffoonish; he's been married and divorced multiple times and quickly falls in love with Mrs. Erlynne, despite the fact that she's clearly manipulating him in order to gain social status by marrying him. Though he is initially preoccupied with Mrs. Erlynne's lack of family relations, he is reassured by Lady Windermere's acceptance of her, and he proposes to Mrs. Erlynne at the party. The other men tease Augustus for his naivety, but he eagerly pursues Mrs. Erlynne regardless. Augustus is dismayed to discover Mrs. Erlynne hiding in Lord Darlington's rooms, but he readily accepts her explanation, and Augusts and Mrs. Erlynne get engaged at the play's conclusion.

Cecil Graham – Cecil Graham is a young gentleman who attends the party and seems to be a friend of Lord Windermere and the other men. Cecil is also the nephew of Lady Jedburgh,

to whom he introduces Mrs. Erlynne at the party. He is portrayed as a lighthearted troublemaker; he frequently teases Augustus and unhesitatingly calls Lord Darlington out for hiding a woman in his rooms. Cecil also seems to be somewhat cynical; he makes light of the distinction between good and evil and implies that it doesn't much matter which side a person ends up on.

Dumby – Dumby is another young gentleman who attends the party. He's first introduced as an example of how empty and performative language can be in social settings. He makes a number of contradictory statements in conversations with different guests, and seems perfectly comfortable doing so. It's also implied that Dumby is Lady Plymdale's lover and possibly Mrs. Erlynne's as well; he initially tells Lady Plymdale that he doesn't know who Mrs. Erlynne is, only to have Mrs. Erlynne reveal that he visits her often. In the third act, Dumby is a comedic foil to Cecil Graham and Augustus, behaving in a carefree, cheerfully naïve way that the other men sometimes mock.

Lady Plymdale – Lady Plymdale is a guest at the party. Though she's married, it's implied that Dumby is her lover. When she finds out that Dumby knows Mrs. Erlynne, she's initially angry but then decides that the connection could be useful; she plans to send her husband to meet Mrs. Erlynne as well so that he'll stop smothering her with attention. Lady Plymdale gossips about Mrs. Erlynne at the start of the party but seems to admire her by the end.

Agatha – Agatha is the Duchess of Berwick's daughter. She is a quiet young woman who only says "Yes, Mamma," though her mother considers her a "chatterbox" and is always saying what a clever speaker Agatha is. Agatha behaves as a model of ladylike politeness and submission throughout the first two acts. She gets engaged to Mr. Hopper at the end of the party, much to her mother's delight, and agrees to move to Australia with him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Hopper – A young Australian man who is highly sought after in London society. Just as the Duchess of Berwick hopes, he pursues Agatha and gets engaged to her at the end of the party.

Parker – Lord Windermere and Lady Windermere's butler.

Lady Jedburgh – Cecil Graham's aunt. She is an admired older woman whom Mrs. Erlynne easily charms at the party.

Rosalie – Lady Windermere's maid.

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.

MORALITY AND AMBIGUITY

At the start of Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which largely centers around a stuffy, upper-class party, Lady Windermere herself and several of the other characters have very clear-cut notions of what makes people good or bad. Lady Windermere, a young wife and well-respected member of London society, is universally seen as good and moral, and she believes that she should only associate with other moral people. Morality and immorality seem to be diametrically opposed, with no possibility of middle ground. However, the boundaries between moral and immoral become muddled as the play goes on, eventually becoming so blurred that it is impossible to separate the two. Good people can easily be mistaken for bad ones and vice versa, but Wilde seems to make an even further-reaching claim: when it comes to human beings and the complicated world in which they live, rigid concepts of good and evil are essentially meaningless.

In Act I, most of the characters seem to be confident in their understanding of what makes a person moral or immoral, but this distinction quickly begins to get confused. Discussing which guests she accepts in her home, Lady Windermere tells her friend Lord Darlington that, as far as she's concerned, a man or woman who behaves badly is an irredeemably bad person. Though Lord Darlington accuses her of being a Puritan, she insists of such people: "I think they should never be forgiven." Lord Darlington believes that thinking about good and evil should be a bit more flexible, but his own philosophy is essentially just an inversion of Lady Windermere's. Lady Windermere and the other ladies call him "bad," but he contends that seeming bad is actually an indication of underlying goodness: "Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows a rather sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad." Still, Lord Darlington's ideas and behavior suggest early on that it's much harder than Lady Windermere thinks to figure out who's good or not. The conflict at the end of this act results directly from Lady Windermere's devotion to her ideals of goodness: "How hard good women are!" exclaims her husband, Lord Windermere, when she refuses to consider inviting the disreputable Mrs. Erlynne to her birthday party. "How weak bad men are!" Lady Windermere counters, setting up a strict dichotomy that will turn out to have disastrous results in the coming scenes.

During and after the party that Lady Windermere throws, the distinctions between "good people" and "bad people" become even less clear. The various comments that guests make throughout the party contribute to the sense that morality and immorality may be almost interchangeable at times. For

example, Lady Plymdale tells Lord Windermere not to be seen paying attention to his wife, since public kindness will only make the guests think that he beats her in private: "The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life." The speed with which nearly everyone at the party changes their opinions of Mrs. Erlynne also shows how flimsy conventional notions of good and evil can be. Despite being convinced only hours earlier that Mrs. Erlynne was as scandalous as can be, the Duchess of Berwick for one is immediately convinced of her goodness simply because Lady Windermere—an ostensibly good person—invited her to the party. The conversation between the men in Lord Darlington's apartment after the party also underscores how meaningless they find clear-cut ideas of good and bad, echoing the play's overarching message. They know that women consider all men to be bad (as the Duchess of Berwick confirmed in the first act), but the men find this label unimportant.

As the play nears its conclusion, Mrs. Erlynne—whose reputation has shifted dramatically throughout the play—emerges as the clearest example of how morality and immorality can never be completely separate when it comes to human beings. On the one hand, Mrs. Erlynne seems to demonstrate her goodness when she sacrifices her reputation in order to prevent Lady Windermere from making the mistake of leaving her husband. Lady Windermere interprets this action as selfless and takes it as evidence that even people who behaved badly in the past can be worthy of forgiveness after all. However, the reader knows what Lady Windermere doesn't: Mrs. Erlynne is actually Lady Windermere's mother, and her motivations throughout have been essentially self-serving, as she has been trying to shed her scandalous reputation and hoist herself back into high society. When Lord Windermere accuses Mrs. Erlynne of blackmailing him in order to regain acceptance in society, she doesn't deny it. The reader has no choice but to accept conflicting truths about Mrs. Erlynne: she loves her daughter, Lady Windermere, and takes action to protect her, but she still behaves unethically and refuses to repent. Mrs. Erlynne is unabashed about both her morality and her immorality, demonstrating that people dealing with the world's complicated realities can never fall cleanly into one category or another.

Even though Lady Windermere doesn't have all the facts about Mrs. Erlynne (by the end of the play, she still doesn't know that the woman is actually her mother), she nonetheless explains to Lord Windermere in Act IV that her previous definitions of good and bad people were faulty, saying, "There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand it hand." Though Lord Windermere doesn't know it, this line is also an admission of Lady Windermere's own guilt; the events of the play have forced her to do things that she thinks are immoral, like contemplate leaving her husband, even though she used to believe that she never would do such things. By the time that Lady Windermere calls Mrs. Erlynne a "good woman" at the end of the play, it's clear that that term—which also shows up in the play's subtitle—means much more than it might initially seem to. As Lord Darlington hinted in the first act, goodness among humans can also be shorthand for evil, and Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere both demonstrate that when people are faced with real-world challenges, neither quality can exist without the other.

LANGUAGE AND TRUTH

Throughout the play, various characters carefully employ both written and spoken language to achieve their ends. However, these attempts repeatedly go awry, with over-reliance on language frequently leading to misunderstanding and unnecessary conflict. Wilde seems to argue that as important as words are, they're not ultimately enough to ensure harmony between people: they also need to rely on unspoken feelings and trust to build loving relationships. Because he uses the medium of written and spoken language to convey this point, Wilde also adds some irony to the play as a whole; the play indicates that the audience has to trust its words to some extent, even as it reveals that those same words are unreliable.

Just as notions of good and bad seem comfortably straightforward at the play's start, so too does language initially seem simple and reliable. When Lady Windermere discovers a locked bank book, which seems to be written evidence of her husband's infidelity (he has been making payments to the scandalous Mrs. Erlynne), she accepts it without question, even though she has never doubted her husband before. Here, she takes writing to be gospel, though it clearly contradicts her emotional and experiential sense of what is true. Similarly, Lady Windermere relies on a written letter to tell Lord Windermere of her intention to run away with Lord Darlington, rather than facing him in person and risking changing her mind. The letter gives her the chance to seem confident and clear in her decision, even though she regrets the choice immediately and resents how the letter ultimately gives the wrong recipient—Mrs. Erlynne—insight into her actions. Furthermore, at the party, the guests seem to agree that what's spoken aloud is what counts, even as their allegiances and relationships shift constantly beneath the surface. They take idle gossip seriously in nearly every case, and Mrs. Erlynne even suggests that speech determines inner reality, saying: "When men give up saying what is charming, they give up thinking what is charming." All of the characters believe that language, whether spoken or written, is conflated with truth.

However, Wilde suggests from the start that speech and language may be shallow and unreliable. The character of Agatha provides a comedic example of how the characters might not be getting as much out of their use of language as they think they are. Although Agatha's mother, the Duchess of

Berwick, refers frequently to Agatha's conversational skill, Agatha herself never says any more than "Yes, mamma." After Agatha gets engaged to Mr. Hopper, her mother exclaims: "My dear one! You always say the right thing." Moments later, however, the Duchess is displeased to find that Agatha has agreed to go to Australia, telling her: "You say the most silly things possible." Throughout, the Duchess of Berwick conveniently ignores that fact that Agatha has actually said nothing at all.

Many of the characters also draw distinctions between different kinds of speech that, though the characters take them seriously, are actually meaningless. For example, a party guest named Cecil Graham claims that "scandal is gossip made tedious by morality," saying that he only talks gossip, not scandal. However, he reveals the meaninglessness of this claim only minutes later when he delightedly points out evidence that Lord Darlington has been hiding a woman in his rooms. Cecil Graham even underscores how little he believes in the meaning of communication when he says, "I like talking to a brick wall—it's the only thing in the world that never contradicts me!" As the reader watches the consequences of the characters' previous reliance on language unfold, it becomes clear that words *are* powerful, but not because they are true. The bank book creates a significant conflict, but Lady Windermere misinterprets it; the letter goes some way toward resolving that conflict, but only because it isn't read by the intended recipient. Language drives the plot, but in nearly every case, it does so through misunderstanding and deception.

By the final act, it becomes clear that in many cases, language has the effect of creating conflict and pain, even in cases where the underlying reality is peaceful and loving. The entire plot hinges on conflict between Lady Windermere and Lord Windermere, but in fact, they each love and desire the other; it's only words that come between them. Reflecting on her painful experiences before, during, and after the party, Lady Windermere contemplates telling her husband what happened with Mrs. Erlynne and dreads speaking about it, saying to the audience, "Actions are the first tragedy in life, words are the second. Words are perhaps the worst. Words are merciless…" The actions she and the other characters take over the course of the play don't lead to ruin, but she nonetheless knows that words still could.

As both Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne attempt to bring their relationship to a satisfying conclusion, they are comforted by having the same first name, Margaret, even though only Mrs. Erlynne knows the true significance of that seeming coincidence. It seems that when it comes down to it, the only word with true meaning is a name, suggesting again that the person is the thing that matters, rather than the language that surrounds the person. By agreeing not to tell Lord Windermere about the events of the previous night—that is, that Lady Windermere was about to leave him for Lord Darlington, but Mrs. Erlynne stopped her—Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne cast language as a barrier to intimacy. Their choice indicates that keeping words unspoken is the only way to keep them from ruining happy realities, in this case the couple's love for each other. At the same time, the fact remains that the misunderstandings of the previous acts have also been essential for helping both women develop more nuanced understandings of themselves and the world. With this conclusion, Wilde suggests that for all the destruction language can cause, people still have no choice but to rely on it as a means of growth and learning.

GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND FEMININITY

Much of the play's plot revolves around the gender roles that were prevalent when it was first performed in 1892. Men and, especially, women are expected to behave in particular ways in order to uphold respectable reputations. However, it quickly becomes clear that the characters' adherence to rigid gender roles is, in almost every case, a flimsy act that falls apart under pressure. The characters are rarely who they seem to be on the surface, and Wilde seems to suggest that gender roles are social constructs that individuals simply perform. However, the play doesn't take those performances lightly. Rather, it hints that performance of gender is actually a serious business that women in particular can use to shape their lives, even if it is inherently false in many ways.

The genteel calm of the first act again sets up the simplistic standards that Wilde will go on to deconstruct. Lady Windermere, Lord Darlington, the Duchess of Berwick, and Lord Windermere all seem to have clear ideas of how men and women should behave in high society, and for the most part, they perform those roles carefully. Lady Windermere is initially confident in her performance of femininity. The audience first sees her arranging **roses**, a quintessentially female activity that also hints at the idea of actively managing the appearance of something that seems naturally beautiful. She is also devoted to rules of propriety, emphasizing to her butler, Parker, that there's nothing illicit about her meeting with her friend Lord Darlington. Lord Darlington also fits neatly into this pattern of clearly defined roles; he is confident that he is a man who behaves nobly, while insisting that Lord Windermere is a quintessential cad. Similarly, the Duchess of Berwick fusses about shielding her daughter Agatha from improper people and calls Lord Darlington "thoroughly depraved." Throughout most of Act I, the characters use gender-based stereotypes as their primary means of understanding each other and themselves.

Only at the end of Act I do these carefully constructed roles begin to break down. Lord Windermere insists that Lady Windermere invite the scandalous Mrs. Erlynne to the party, but rather than doing as expected and complying with her

husband's orders, Lady Windermere remains devoted to her ideals of goodness and refuses to send the invitation. She is caught between two aspects of conventional female gender roles: ladylike morality on the one hand and obedience to her husband on the other. The ensuing conflict begins to show how destructive it can be to try and maintain such elaborate performances. The symbol of the **fan** also dramatizes the dual nature of women's performed gender roles. On the one hand, Lady Windermere's fan is a signal of conventional femininity, something she may use to carefully hide her true face and instead put forward a ladylike image. But on the other hand, Lady Windermere threatens to hit Mrs. Erlynne with the beautiful fan, transforming this symbol of delicacy into a literal weapon. This moment hints that the flip side of polite performance is violent conflict, foreshadowing the ways that gender roles become weaponized in the following acts.

At Lady Windermere's party, all of the guests remain preoccupied with the trappings of their gender roles and seem more interested in these superficial concerns than with connecting with each other as individuals. However, their behavior undermines the roles they play even as their performances become more elaborate. The ball is full of gestures toward the rules society places on men and women. For example, the Duchess of Berwick nags Agatha about properly managing the names on her dance card and scolds her for considering dancing with younger sons, since society deems them worthless due to their small inheritances. At the same time, the guests' seeming propriety masks countless instances of misbehavior, deception, and deviance from "proper" gender norms. For instance, Mr. Dumby and Lady Plymdale spend the ball together and seem to behave as a couple, even while discussing Lady Plymdale's absent husband. Meanwhile, Lord Darlington behaves like a gentleman in front of most of the guests, only to confess his love to Lady Windermere and beg her to leave her husband, while Lord Windermere himself is in the other room.

As the play's characters try desperately to achieve their desired outcomes, the women discover that doing so requires both doubling down on prescribed gender roles and, at the same time, subverting them. During the party, Mrs. Erlynne relies on the role of the charming, beautiful outsider to manipulate the men around her and, eventually, gain acceptance among the other women. However, she discovers that in order to rescue Lady Windermere from catastrophe (Lady Windermere is planning to accept Lord Darlington's offer to run away together), she'll need to perform a different version of femininity. When she reveals herself in Lord Darlington's apartment, she plays the part of a stereotypical harlot in order to explain the presence of Lady Windermere's fan in Lord Darlington's apartment. She claims that she took the fan from the party accidentally and brought it to the apartment herself, thus fooling the men into believing that Lady Windermere herself isn't there. Mrs. Erlynne's role switch here shows how both versions of her character are performances of predetermined gender roles, while also demonstrating how important those performances can be.

At the end of the play, both Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere again use stereotypes of femininity to protect themselves. Lady Windermere allows her husband to think that her weeping and distress come from being delicate and overwhelmed, when she's secretly upset at her own actions. Similarly, Mrs. Erlynne knows that society will view the bond between mother and daughter as significant, and she uses this fact to her advantage when she threatens to ruin Lady Windermere if Lord Windermere tells her the truth—if Lord Windermere tells his wife that Mrs. Erlynne is actually her mother, Mrs. Erlynne is prepared to behave so dishonorably that Lady Windermere's reputation will be pulled down in the process. Though she does not behave as a mother typically should, Mrs. Erlynne nonetheless uses the social constructs connected to motherhood for her own gain. The gift of the fan from Lady Windermere to Mrs. Erlynne signifies their mutual understanding of these necessities at the play's end. Their shared name's presence on the fan suggests that while the real person underneath still matters, the kind of gender-based artifice that the fan provides is nonetheless crucial for women's survival in society.

FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

Throughout the play, characters frequently point to labels of friendship and family to prove their worth to each other. Though these close bonds do turn out to be crucial in some cases, the play's events also show how, in the context of a corrupt society, even seemingly reliable relationships can easily become fraught. Wilde cautions against his characters' tendencies to idealize bonds of friendship and family, suggesting that people might be better off if they could view each other as complex, unique individuals rather than caricatures participating in stereotypes of how relationships should be.

Even in the first act, the concept of friendship becomes blurry when Lord Darlington and the Duchess of Berwick come to visit Lady Windermere. Despite Lady Windermere's commitment to maintaining appropriate boundaries with Lord Darlington, he repeatedly tells her that he wants to be her "friend." Her comment that they're "already very good friends" indicates that Lord Darlington's idea of friendship goes well beyond Lady Windermere's; both of them likely know at this point that his words are actually innuendo for his romantic feelings. Even at this early point, it's clear that the characters can't rely on concepts like friendship when it comes to establishing personal boundaries and figuring out whom to trust. The Duchess of Berwick's appearance with Agatha, moments later, underscores this point. She casts herself as

Lady Windermere's friend, but her motivations for visiting aren't friendly ones; she simply wants to gossip and further her social ambitions for her daughter. From the start, Lady Windermere's supposed friends have their own reasons for seeking out her company.

During and after the party, both friendship and family ties are further corrupted as the characters use them for their own complicated ends. As in the first act, the people at the party who claim to be friends of Lord Windermere and Lady Windermere seem unconcerned with their hosts' actual feelings or lives; they're more interested in gossiping about them and using the party for their own social gain. Several characters also directly disparage their family connections for the sake of their social standing. The Duchess of Berwick, who claimed in the first act that her nieces are models of virtue, quickly changes her mind after getting to know Mrs. Erlynne, calling the nieces "horrid." Similarly, Cecil Graham bemoans spending time with his family and plays the situation for laughs, asking, "Wonder why it is one's people are always so tedious?" The clearest indication of the fragility of seemingly strong relationships comes when Lady Windermere attempts to take Lord Darlington up on his offer to be her friend. Believing that her husband is cheating on her, Lady Windermere tells Lord Darlington that he was right; she does need to rely on his friendship. However, she's horrified when he takes this opportunity to confess his love and beg her to run away with him. When she can't immediately decide what to do, he exits and says he'll never come back, making it clear that their so-called friendship was only ever a way for him to try to seduce her.

Somewhat ironically, the play's truest friendship ends up forming between Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne, whom the audience knows are actually family. Although Lady Windermere is Mrs. Erlynne's daughter, she never finds out about this relationship. She is extremely grateful to Mrs. Erlynne, but not because of their familial connection; rather, she sees that Mrs. Erlynne has proven herself to be trustworthy through concrete action on Lady Windermere's behalf. The bond the two form underscores just how shallow the other "friendships" in the play are. However, the audience knows that Mrs. Erlynne is far from blameless. She uses her status as Lady Windermere's mother to manipulate Lord Windermere, behaving in a way that Lady Windermere herself would be horrified by if she knew all the details. Lady Windermere openly admits to idealizing the mother she believes to be dead, which makes Mrs. Erlynne realize that she'll never be able to live up to her daughter's high standards. With this, Wilde implies that idealizing close relationships can only harm them; Lady Windermere's insistence that her mother must be perfect prevents her from ever actually knowing that mother.

At the same time, Mrs. Erlynne also demonstrates how idealized versions of family bonds can spur positive change. She finally succeeds in convincing Lady Windermere not to run away with Lord Darlington by appealing to her motherly instincts and pointing out that she can't abandon her baby. Even as Mrs. Erlynne perceives motherly love to be a burden—she tells Lord Windermere that loving Lady Windermere "made [her] suffer too much—she also understands that it can be an advantage under the right circumstances. In the end, the two women part ways fondly, with only images of each other to hold onto—a photograph of Lady Windermere and her baby in Mrs. Erlynne's case, and a carved **miniature** of her mother in Lady Windermere's case. Their case demonstrates how even in close bonds of genuine love, idealized notions of relationships prevent the truth from coming to light. The two women may be happy enough keeping only symbols of each other, but these symbols are pale stand-ins for the deeper bond that they might have had.

SYMBOLS

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

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

The play's most prominent symbol, Lady Windermere's fan represents the performative nature of femininity. Traditionally, respectable young women like Lady Windermere would have used beautiful fans like this one both as fashionable accessories and as ways to hide their faces in social situations, thus appearing more ladylike. At the start of the play, Lady Windermere uses her fan in this conventional way; it's simply an appealing gift from her husband, Lord Windermere. However, the fan's meaning changes when Lady Windermere threatens to hit Mrs. Erlynne with it; at this moment, Lady Windermere shows that performances of femininity can actually be violent and dangerous. The fan continues to highlight both the pitfalls and the benefits associated with attempting to be a respectable woman. On the one hand, the fan is nearly Lady Windermere's downfall in Lord Darlington's apartment, but on the other hand, both she and Mrs. Erlynne go on to use it as a tool to manipulate men for their own gain. For example, Mrs. Erlynne wins Augustus's affection back in part by asking him to carry the fan. At the end of the play, Lady Windermere gives the fan to Mrs. Erlynne, and the gift acts as a symbol of their ongoing bond, suggesting that dealing together with the strictures of society is one way in which women learn to gain strength from each other. It's also significant that the fan bears their shared name, Margaret; this fact underscores how their identities are both tied to their performances of womanhood.

ROSES

Roses, which are typically associated with picturesque femininity, appear prominently at both the start and end of the play. At the beginning, Lady Windermere is arranging roses when Lord Darlington comes to visit her, which associates them with her simplistic views on morality and her dedication to performing the part of a perfect lady. From that point on, Lady Windermere's understanding of the world and her role in it becomes increasingly complicated, with the play's events showing her how things like morality are much more nuanced than she initially thought. However, the symbol of roses returns at the end of the play, with Lady Windermere looking forward to seeing the roses at the country house that she plans to visit with Lord Windermere. This symbolic return indicates that even with her newfound wisdom, Lady Windermere is still tempted to some extent by the comforting, simple version of perfection and femininity that she once believed in. Through her, the play seems to suggest people will always wish to play idealized roles and rely on straightforward ideas of good and evil, no matter how much evidence they have that the real world is more complicated.

THE MINIATURE

The miniature is a small figurine of her mother that Lady Windermere treasures and kisses when she says her prayers each night. Though Lady Windermere believes that her mother is dead, the audience knows that Mrs. Erlynne is actually her mother. The miniature symbolizes the way that Lady Windermere idealizes her mother, and the way that the real Mrs. Erlynne would never be able to live up to that perfect, false version of herself. Lady Windermere's continued love of the figurine—and of her ideals—shows again that she's still tempted by unambiguous morality, even though she knows by the end of the play that morality is not black-and-white but exists in shades of gray.

Additionally, the miniature (along with the photograph of Lady Windermere that Mrs. Erlynne keeps) highlights how wordless connections with other individuals are sometimes more powerful than anything language can create. In the end, Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere both choose silence over language: Mrs. Erlynne doesn't tell Lady Windermere her true identity, and Lady Windermere doesn't tell Lord Windermere about almost leaving him. Instead, the two women opt for simple, visual representations of the truth that they can happily treasure and enjoy, without confronting the unnecessary complications that speaking up would cause. This ending suggests that in some cases, literal truth as depicted by language is less valuable than consciously deciding to view reality in a positive way.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* published in 2008.

Act I Quotes

LORD DARLINGTON: Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.

Related Characters: Lord Darlington (speaker), Lady Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

When Lord Darlington comes to visit Lady Windermere before her party, she scolds him for paying her too many compliments and says that she thinks he pretends to be much worse than he is. He defends his behavior with these words, flipping the definitions of good and bad to paint himself in a positive light, even though his actions would conventionally be seen as negative. The optimism he mocks resembles Lady Windermere's own views on morality: she believes it's easy to tell who's moral and who's immoral.

This moment is an early example of the play's blurring of the lines between good and evil. It suggests that appearances can be deceiving, and that in some cases it may not even be possible to define a person as good or bad. This also introduces the idea of language as something untrustworthy; Lord Darlington's compliments to Lady Windermere might be straightforward flattery, or they might be something more complicated.

LORD DARLINGTON: Well then, setting mercenary people aside, who, of course, are dreadful, do you think seriously that women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?

LADY WINDERMERE: *(standing at table)* I think they should never be forgiven.

LORD DARLINGTON: And men? Do you think that there should be the same laws for men as there are for women?

LADY WINDERMERE: Certainly!

LORD DARLINGTON: I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere, Lord Darlington (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Darlington initiates this exchange after bringing up a supposedly hypothetical situation about whether a wife whose husband is unfaithful can rightfully be unfaithful herself. Lady Windermere reiterates that there can be no exceptions in her idea of morality; moral people and immoral people are completely different, and immoral people can never be redeemed. Lord Darlington disagrees, extending his previous claim that good and wicked behavior might not be so different after all.

Lady Windermere's claim that the same rules apply to both men and women also reveals her willful naivety at this point in the play. She has already shown that she understands how carefully women must perform their femininity, so it seems rather simplistic for her to claim that gender roles play no role here. Lord Darlington's final line in this exchange foreshadows that all of these clear boundaries will be blurred—and perhaps rightfully so—by the play's conclusion.

LADY WINDERMERE: It is very kind of you, Duchess, to come and tell me all this. But I can't believe that my husband is untrue to me.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Pretty child! I was like that once. Now I know that all men are monsters. *(Lady Windermere rings bell)* The only thing to do is feed the wretches well. A good cook does wonders, and that I know you have. My dear Margaret, you are not going to cry?

LADY WINDERMERE: You needn't be afraid, Duchess, I never cry.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: That's quite right, dear. Crying is the refuge of plain women but the ruin of pretty ones.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Berwick , Lady Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess of Berwick describes all the evidence of Lord Windermere's connection to Mrs. Erlynne, but Lady Windermere refuses to believe that he might be unfaithful. The Duchess is sympathetic but lighthearted in response; she notes that it's tempting to believe in men's worthiness but more realistic to simply focus on keeping them happy and distracted.

The passage underscores how painful it can be to have rigid ideas about morality, as Lady Windermere does. Confronted with evidence that her good husband has behaved in a way that seems immoral, Lady Windermere cannot even accept the reality in front of her. However, in a way her intuition is correct here; the Duchess's claims are accurate but nonetheless misleading, in that Lord Windermere actually is still faithful to Lady Windermere.

Additionally, this exchange highlights the bleak realities of strict gender roles. Men are pigeonholed as beyond redemption, while women are trapped denying their feelings in order to remain as outwardly appealing as possible. The Duchess implies this reality in her final line by suggesting that part of being "pretty" is avoiding the "ruin" of genuine emotion.

LADY WINDERMERE: I did not spy on you. I never knew of this woman's existence till half an hour ago. Someone who pitied me was kind enough to tell me what everyone in London knows already—your daily visits to Curzon Street, your mad infatuation, the monstrous sums of money you squander on this infamous woman! *(Crossing L.)*

LORD WINDERMERE: Margaret! don't talk like that of Mrs. Erlynne, you don't know how unjust it is!

Related Characters: Lord Windermere, Lady Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering the bank book with its record of Lord Windermere's payments to Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere confronts Lord Windermere about the story the Duchess of Berwick told her. He denies that anything illicit is happening between him and Mrs. Erlynne, but she is too furious at what she imagines has occurred to listen to him. This moment shows just how powerful (and misleading) language can be; the Duchess's story has made Lady Windermere feel horrible, even though her conclusions are incorrect. Her belief that wicked actions are unforgiveable only compounds her distress here.

Lady Windermere's description of the Duchess as someone "kind" who "pitied" her is also telling. Throughout the play, the Duchess seems to care much more about her own goals of gossiping and ensuring her daughter receives a socially advantageous marriage proposal than she does about the feelings of those around her. Her motives in visiting Lady Windermere are thus debatable; did she really go out of kindness, or was she looking out for her own interests? This moment highlights just how uncertain friendship can be in a society like this one.

LORD WINDERMERE: Ah, Margaret, do this for my sake; it is her last chance.

LADY WINDERMERE: What has that to do with me?

LORD WINDERMERE: How hard good women are!

LADY WINDERMERE: How weak bad men are!

Related Characters: Lady Windermere, Lord Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Windermere begs Lady Windermere to invite Mrs. Erlynne to the party, saying that doing so will allow Mrs. Erlynne to reenter polite society. Lady Windermere refuses, maintaining that she will not have anything to do with her. This moment highlights how inconsistent even Lady Windermere is when it comes to applying her ideas of strict morality. She deems her husband immoral without hesitation, even though she believed him to be wonderful until only a few minutes earlier. For all that she says the categories are separate, good and evil have already become indistinguishable.

Lord Windermere's point that this is Mrs. Erlynne's "last chance" also underscores the importance of having well-respected friends such as Lady Windermere, even though readers have already seen how superficial friendship can be. Lady Windermere's insistence that she and Mrs. Erlynne are not at all connected becomes ironic later on, when it is revealed that they are in fact very closely linked.

LADY WINDERMERE: There is not a *good* woman in London who would not applaud me. We have been too lax. We must make an example, I propose to begin tonight. *(Picking up fan)* Yes, you gave me this fan today; it was your birthday present. If that woman crosses my threshold, I shall strike her across the face with it. *(Rings bell)*

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After Lord Windermere sends Mrs. Erlynne an invitation to the party, Lady Windermere swears that she will humiliate her if she attends. Lord Windermere says that doing so would make all the other women pity her, but here Lady Windermere maintains that she only cares about the opinions of women whom she considers "good." Already, it has become clear that her unambiguous view of morality is out of touch with reality, but at this point she refuses to

bend.

This moment also shows the dangerous side of strict gender roles, especially those that women are expected to perform. A fan's usual purpose is to hide a woman's true face while allowing her to appear delicate and conventionally feminine. Here, however, Lady Windermere threatens to turn this performance around and use this ladylike prop as a weapon instead. This threat shows how forcing women to hide their emotions in favor of performing femininity can actually lead to conflict rather than harmony.

Act II Quotes

LORD AUGUSTUS: *(coming up to Lord Windermere)* Want to speak to you particularly, dear boy. I'm worn to a shadow. Know I don't look it. None of us men do look what we really are. Demmed good thing, too. What I want to know is this. Who is she? Where does she come from? Why hasn't she got any demmed relations? Demmed nuisance, relations! But they make one so demmed respectable.

Related Characters: Augustus (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Arriving at the party, Augustus takes Lord Windermere aside and asks him what to do about Mrs. Erlynne, whom he loves even though she lacks a respectable background. His words here show how the dual nature of family relationships functions in this play; family backgrounds may hinder people, but they are nonetheless crucial for success in polite society. Additionally, Augustus's observation that men don't show their true selves outwardly is one of the few places in which the play suggests that gender norms may lead to inauthenticity for men as well as women. Augustus seems to say that he doesn't feel able to express his true emotions, because he's too busy playing the part of a jovial party guest.

LORD WINDERMERE: I am afraid—if you will excuse me—I must join my wife.

LADY PLYMDALE: Oh, you mustn't dream of such a thing. It's most dangerous nowadays for a husband to pay any attention to his wife in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when they're alone. The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life.

Related Characters: Lady Plymdale, Lord Windermere (speaker), Lady Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Lady Plymdale warns Lord Windermere against seeming too fond of his wife in public, since it will only make people think that they are privately in conflict. These words further reinforce the idea that good and bad behavior may be difficult to distinguish from each other; even kindness from one person to another may mask a dark truth.

Furthermore, Lady Plymdale hints at the idea that even when both partners conform perfectly to their respective gender norms, it's still impossible to convince the world that a marriage is happy. This observation suggests that gender roles for both men and women are inherently limited; they can never capture the reality of a person or a relationship. Ironically, Lord and Lady Windermere actually do have a much happier married life than most of the other characters seem to, but gossip and external perceptions interrupt their peaceful union.

LADY WINDERMERE: *(C.)* London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognize them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them. *(Moves up)* Lord Darlington, will you give me back my fan, please? Thanks…A useful thing a fan, isn't it?…I want a friend tonight, Lord Darlington: I didn't know I would want one so soon.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker), Lord Windermere, Lord Darlington

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24-25

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is Lady Windermere's reply to Lord Windermere when she asks him to trust her. This moment shows a particularly explicit instance of the fan's role as a symbol of conventional femininity and its conflicting uses. Where before it was a simple aspect of Lord Windermere's love for Lady Windermere (as he gave it to her as a birthday gift), it now becomes a tool that Lady Windermere uses to navigate a treacherous social situation and regain some personal agency.

Her mention of needing a friend also shows how even Lady Windermere uses the idea of friendship as shorthand for a means of meeting her own ends. She isn't interested in strengthening her bond with Lord Darlington for its own sake or because she loves him; she only wants to get his support to help her through the situation with her husband. Even for someone as ostensibly moral as Lady Windermere, friendship seems to be a hollow, utilitarian concept.

DUMBY: What a mystery you are!

LADY PLYMDALE: *(looking at him)* I wish *you* were!

DUMBY: I am—to myself. I am the only person in the world I should like to know thoroughly; but I don't see any chance of it just at present.

Related Characters: Lady Plymdale, Dumby (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Lady Plymdale finds out that Dumby (who seems to be her lover) already knows Mrs. Erlynne, she is initially angry but then decides that her own husband should get to know Mrs. Erlynne too—it might keep him busy enough that he'll stop bothering Lady Plymdale by giving her too much attention. This wish is a "mystery" to Dumby, which shows just how much different gender norms keep men and women separate from each other in this society. Lady Plymdale's logic makes perfect sense to her given her role as a wife and the limited options available to her, but Dumby has no frame of reference for her wishes.

Dumby response that even he is a "mystery" to himself extends this idea further, suggesting that needing to keep up appearances all the time alienates everyone—even men—from themselves. Earlier in this act, Dumby effortlessly changed his opinions in order to match those of whomever he was talking to; perhaps this constant adaptation to social expectations makes it difficult to maintain a true individual identity.

LORD DARLINGTON: Wrong? What is wrong? It's wrong for a man to abandon his wife for a shameless woman. It is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her. You said once you would make no compromise with things. Make none now. Be brave! Be yourself!

LADY WINDERMERE: I am afraid of being myself. Let me think. Let me wait! My husband may return to me. *(Sits down on sofa)*

Related Characters: Lady Windermere, Lord Darlington (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After Lord Darlington professes his love for Lady Windermere, he insists that it isn't wrong for Lady Windermere to run away from him. Rather, it's wrong for her to remain with her husband when he's treated her so badly. This moment is a complete reversal of these two characters' stances from Act I. Lord Darlington suddenly has very clear ideas about what constitutes right and wrong, while Lady Windermere hesitates to follow through on the strict dichotomy she previously claimed to believe in. The actions that each of them take in this sequence suggests that perhaps no one really has a clear idea of good and evil; it seems that they each simply believe what is convenient for their purposes at the time. Through this role reversal, the play seems to indicate that labeling individual actions or people as good or bad may be futile, since everyone ends up being a confused mixture of both.

Note also that Lord Darlington's ideas about morality here seem to rely on conventional notions of proper gender roles while simultaneously. He appeals to the idea that a man should be faithful and a woman should be honorable, yet the rest of the party has demonstrated that neither of those outcomes is actually the norm. Again, firm ideas about what men and women should and shouldn't do based on their gender quickly become convoluted and contradictory.

MRS. ERLYNNE: *(laughing)* Then we will talk of it on the terrace. Even business should have a picturesque background. Should it not, Windermere? With a proper background women can do anything.

Related Characters: Mrs. Erlynne (speaker), Augustus, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After securing a marriage proposal from Augustus, Mrs. Erlynne takes Lord Windermere aside to ask him for money to use for the marriage, which he apparently promised her previously. Hesitant, Lord Windermere asks not to discuss it at the party, so she directs him to the terrace. This quotation is notable mainly for the double entendre of the word "background," which refers literally to the pretty scenery of the terrace while also referring figuratively to Mrs. Erlynne's plan to convince people she comes from a good family who left her the money. The invocation here of the crucial role of family highlights just how important a person's family relations are in determining their respectability, particularly for women.

The shifting meaning of this word also provides an especially stark example of how unreliable language can be. Anyone listening in might believe that Mrs. Erlynne is simply talking about the scenery, but in reality Mrs. Erlynne is confessing to the manipulative plan that becomes clear later in the play.

Act III Quotes

LADY WINDERMERE: I must go back—no; I can't go back, my letter has put me in their power—Arthur would not take me back! That fatal letter! No! Lord Darlington leaves England tomorrow. I will go with him—I have no choice.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker), Lord Darlington, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Alone in Lord Darlington's rooms, Lady Windermere debates what to do and feels that all of her options will lead to negative outcomes. She is caught here between different ideas of what it means to be a good woman; should she remain loyal to her husband as she once thought was necessary, or should she take Lord Darlington's advice and put her own needs first by running away? Complicating matters is the fact that she still loves Lord Windermere and feels nothing for Lord Darlington. The complex contradictions leave her feeling helpless, trapped between conflicting versions of how the world says women should behave.

In this quotation, she also recognizes that the letter she wrote is in large part the cause of her predicament, even though she wrote it with the goal of making the situation easier for herself. Even before she knows that the wrong recipient has gotten hold of the letter, Lady Windermere already sees how it has interfered with the reality she wishes for. This moment adds further depth to the idea that language is often more of a barrier to communication than it is an aid to it.

LADY WINDERMERE: Go back to my husband, Mrs. Erlynne. He belongs to you and not to me. I suppose he is afraid of a scandal. Men are such cowards. They outrage every law of the world, and are afraid of the world's tongue. But he had better prepare himself. He shall have a scandal. He shall have the worst scandal there has been in London for years. He shall see his name in every vile paper, mine on every hideous placard.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs. Erlynne comes to implore Lady Windermere to return home to her husband, Lady Windermere initially believes that Lord Windermere sent her. She notes that he must not want her back because he loves her, but rather because he's afraid of ruining his reputation. Lady Windermere's words here show again how destructive a rigid view of morality can be; because she believes that Lord Windermere has behaved immorally and unforgivably, she sees treating him badly in turn as her only path forward. This desperate plan also shows how limited the options available to women to exercise agency are at this time.

Additionally, it's telling that Lady Windermere focuses so explicitly on language as the medium through which she'll ruin Lord Windermere. With words like "the world's tongue" and "every vile paper," she highlights the fact that what is written or spoken is often what becomes reality, even when it's based on something untrue.

MRS. ERLYNNE: [...] Back to your house, Lady Windermere—your husband loves you! He has never swerved for a moment from the love he bears you. But even if he had a thousand loves, you must stay with your child. If he was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you, your place is with your child.

Related Characters: Mrs. Erlynne (speaker), Lord Windermere, Lady Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After finding Lady Windermere in Lord Darlington's rooms, Mrs. Erlynne pleads with her to return to her husband, but Lady Windermere is unwilling to listen at first. It is only in this moment, when Mrs. Erlynne repeatedly emphasizes Lady Windermere's role as a mother, that she finally gives in and agrees to go. Although Lady Windermere doesn't know it, this speech from Mrs. Erlynne has a hidden second meaning; she is actually lamenting her own failure as a mother even as she begs Lady Windermere not to make the same mistake.

The fact that family bonds are the thing that finally makes Lady Windermere salvage her situation underscores that even while these bonds can cause pain, they're also an essential aspect of living a successful life. It's also telling that Lady Windermere's regained sense of control over her life comes from embracing a particular form of female identity: that of motherhood. In this case, both women are able to subvert the strictures of gender roles in order to gain strength and achieve their desired ends.

LORD AUGUSTUS: You want to make her out a wicked woman. She is not!

CECIL GRAHAM: Oh! Wicked women bother one. Good women bore one. That is the only difference between them.

LORD AUGUSTUS: *(puffing a cigar)* Mrs. Erlynne has a future before her.

DUMBY: Mrs. Erlynne has a past before her.

LORD AUGUSTUS: I prefer women with a past. They're always so demmed amusing to talk to.

Related Characters: Dumby , Cecil Graham, Augustus (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

As the other men tease Augustus for his fondness of Mrs. Erlynne, he protests that she's actually not a wicked woman at all. Cecil and Dumby go on to complicate this point, with Cecil pointing out that it doesn't much matter whether women are good or wicked and Dumby reminding everyone of the importance of Mrs. Erlynne's past. His notes that her past is *before* her reinforces the theme that one's family origins are inescapable; they affect the future as much as they do the past.

In this passage, both Cecil and Augustus imply that they might prefer a seemingly bad woman to a seemingly good one. As the play has shown before, this muddled view on women's value makes it impossible for any woman to live up to the world's expectations; in other words, she is bad if she's good and bad if she's bad. In such a mixed-up society, it seems as if clear-cut morality (like Lady Windermere's) may not have much meaning at all.

CECIL GRAHAM: Now, my dear Tuppy, don't be led astray into the paths of virtue. Reformed, you would be perfectly tedious. That is the worst of women. They always want one to be good. And if we are good, when they meet us, they don't love us at all. They like to find us quite irretrievably bad, and to leave us quite unattractively good.

Related Characters: Cecil Graham (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Augustus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

Attempting to live up to Mrs. Erlynne's expectations, Augustus (whom the other men nickname Tuppy) refuses to drink or play cards. Here, Cecil cautions him that these restrictions won't do him any good; Mrs. Erlynne will find a way to view him as a bad person anyway. Cecil seems to think that being good is not only tedious, but also useless as far as relationships with women are concerned. Right after this, Lord Darlington agrees, sympathizing with the idea that women always do think that men are bad.

This sequence indicates that the impossible standards of conventional morality and gender roles might apply to men as well as women. Just as Lady Windermere finds herself unable to live up to everyone's conflicting expectations of what it means to be a good woman, so too do most of the men here feel that they're doomed to be viewed as bad no matter what they do. Of courses, the difference is that the men can discuss these matters lightly and humorously. In contrast, this same situation proves completely devastating for Lady Windermere. That inequality highlights how much more oppressive gender roles are for women, even though they apply to men as well.

CECIL GRAHAM: That is a great error. Experience is a question of instinct about life. I have got it. Tuppy hasn't. Experience is the name Tuppy gives to his mistakes. That is all. *(Lord Augustus looks around indignantly)*

DUMBY: Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

CECIL GRAHAM: *(standing with his back to the fireplace)* One shouldn't commit any.

Related Characters: Dumby , Cecil Graham (speaker), Augustus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Lord Darlington accuses Cecil of lacking life experience, Cecil flippantly replies that experience doesn't actually require having lived a long time. Even though Augustus (Tuppy) is apparently much older than Cecil is, Cecil considers himself more experienced, because he has good instincts and Augustus has simply spent many years making mistakes. Dumby comments that perhaps everyone thinks of their mistakes as experience, in response to which Cecil echoes Lady Windermere's previous position that it's better not to make mistakes at all.

This quotation further reveals how pointless it can be to talk about moral absolutes like mistakes and wisdom in a society that lacks any clear definition of what these terms really mean. By this point, Cecil has shown himself to be a somewhat foolish, yet very confident character; it's ironic that he of all people is opposed to making mistakes, when he seems to take little care with his own actions. Additionally, the confusion of terms here also underscores that language may be of little use in resolving these conflicts. Even a word like "experience," which has such a specific concrete meaning, can be recontextualized to mean something completely different and even contradictory.

Act IV Quotes

LADY WINDERMERE: [...] Perhaps she told them the true reason of her being there, and the real meaning of that—fatal fan of mine. Oh, if he knows—how can I look him in the face again? He would never forgive me. *(Touches bell)* How securely one thinks one lives—out of reach of temptation, sin, folly. And then suddenly—Oh! Life is terrible. It rules us, we do not rule it.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Awaiting Lord Windermere the morning after the party, Lady Windermere fears that he could never forgive her if she told him what happened. Lady Windermere's desperation here illustrates her discovery that the line between good and evil—if indeed there is a line at all—is much thinner than she ever suspected. Whereas she thought she lived in stability and moral certainty, she has discovered that she's actually just as prone to "temptation, sin, and folly" as anyone else is.

It's also telling that she refers to her fan as fatal. What previously served as a form of protection in her performance of femininity has become a dangerous liability. With these words, Lady Windermere seems to express that it's always risky for a woman to attempt a perfect rendition

of conventional gender roles, even when the woman is as conscientious as Lady Windermere. There's always the danger that the performance will be misinterpreted or judged by the wrong audience. Indeed, she implies that Lord Windermere is not capable of perceiving the moral nuance that she now does; it seems, then, that women are alone in trying to win this impossible game.

LORD WINDERMERE: […] Oh, the shame of it, the shame of it. To tell it is to live through it all again. Actions are the first tragedy in life, words are the second. Words are the worst. Words are merciless…

Related Characters: Lady Windermere (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

After deciding that she must tell Lord Windermere what really happened in Lord Darlington's rooms, Lady Windermere ponders the act of speaking about what has already happened. She quickly concludes that while actions can cause some pain, words can cause even more pain. This statement further emphasizes the play's theme of language and truth. The problem, it seems, isn't necessarily that language tells lies; it's more that even when describing something true (like Lady Windermere's behavior after the party), words always distort reality and create implications that wouldn't otherwise be there. Telling the truth seems morally correct here, but Lady Windermere senses that it could be ruinous.

This quotation is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that Lady Windermere ultimately decides—at Mrs. Erlynne's urging—not to tell her husband the truth. As a result, their marriage remains stable, and even Mrs. Erlynne gets a kind of happy ending with Augustus. From this result, it's clear that Lady Windermere's actions actually don't cause ruin, but describing them in words likely would have.

LORD WINDERMERE: I wish that at the same time she would give you a miniature she kisses every night before she prays—It's the miniature of a young innocent-looking girl with beautiful dark hair.

MRS. ERLYNNE: Ah yes, I remember. How long ago that seems. *(Goes to a sofa and sits down)* It was done before I was married. Dark hair and an innocent expression were the fashion then, Windermere!

Related Characters: Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere (speaker), Lady Windermere

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In his disgust at Mrs. Erlynne's behavior, Lord Windermere says that he can't even stand to see the fan anymore, to which she replies that she'll ask Lady Windermere if she can keep it. Here, Lord Windermere adds that she ought to take the miniature as well, which is a representation of the seemingly perfect mother whom Lady Windermere believes to be dead. Lady Windermere's love for the miniature demonstrates both how appealing idealized versions of people can be and how impossible it is for real people—namely, the real Mrs. Erlynne—to live up to those ideals. The bond that the miniature creates also shows how nonverbal connection can sometimes be more powerful than meaning created through language.

Additionally, Mrs. Erlynne's remark suggests that in contemporary society, true innocence is a thing of the past; she no longer feels able to be a perfect woman and doesn't much care if she falls short. This perspective further reinforces that idea that rigid morality has little relevance to real life.

MRS. ERLYNNE: *(rising)* I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don't do such things—not so long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No—what consoles one now is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes her. And nothing in the world will induce me to do that.

Related Characters: Mrs. Erlynne (speaker), Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Though Mrs. Erlynne confesses to having essentially blackmailed Lord Windermere, she refuses to apologize or repent. By emphasizing the importance of her charm and beauty, she suggests that women have no choice but to take advantage of whatever opportunities they get; she refuses to place any more restrictions on herself in addition to the ones that society has already burdened her with. This statement further confuses the play's notions of good and evil; according to Mrs. Erlynne, true goodness has little to do with society's narrow-minded idea of it.

Additionally, Mrs. Erlynne comment about "silly modern novels" emphasizes that written versions of reality often create confusion or unrealistic expectations. To some extent, Mrs. Erlynne is probably right; Lord Windermere's ideas about what women should do most likely are based, at least in part, on written representations of women. Again, this moment shows that language plays a significant role in distorting reality and even causing the kind of gender-based oppression against which Mrs. Erlynne protests. Of course, there's also a certain irony here, as the play itself is a work of literature and so seems almost to undercut its own credibility.

MRS. ERLYNNE: Yes. *(Pause)* You are devoted to your mother's memory, Lady Windermere, your husband tells me.

LADY WINDERMERE: We all have ideals in life. At least we all should. Mine is my mother.

MRS. ERLYNNE: Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better. They wound, but they're better.

LADY WINDERMERE: *(shaking her head)* If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything.

MRS. ERLYNNE: Everything?

LADY WINDERMERE: Yes.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne (speaker), Lord Windermere

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

Before she departs, Mrs. Erlynne asks Lady Windermere about her devotion to her deceased mother, and Lady Windermere replies that her idealized image of her mother is extremely important to her. It's significant that this moment comes at the end of the play, after Lady Windermere has learned so much about moral ambiguity. Even though her ideas are much less rigid than they were in Act I, she is still tempted here by the notion that a person—namely, her mother—could truly be perfect in every way. The note that she would lose "everything" without this idea of her mother further emphasizes how important family connections are, even when they're also fraught. Lady Windermere's words here echo her devotion to the miniature figurine of her mother, which Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne discussed earlier.

Even though Mrs. Erlynne knows that Lady Windermere's tendency toward idealization is flawed—she explicitly says that "realities are better"—it's notable that she doesn't stay to argue the point or try and prove it through revealing her own identity. Instead, she leaves, presumably never to see her daughter again. Mrs. Erlynne might believe that realities are better, but especially because she's a woman in a precarious position, she doesn't act on this belief. Through this choice, the play illustrates one way in which unambiguous ideas about morality end up persisting in society, even when individual people know better.

LORD WINDERMERE: *(gravely)* She is better than one thought her.

LADY WINDERMERE: She is better than I am.

LORD WINDERMERE: *(smiling as he strokes her hair)* Child, you and she belong to different worlds. Into your world evil has never entered.

LADY WINDERMERE: Don't say that, Arthur. There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice.

Related Characters: Lady Windermere, Lord Windermere (speaker), Mrs. Erlynne

Related Themes:

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

At the play's conclusion, Lord Windermere grudgingly admits that Mrs. Erlynne isn't so bad after all, while Lady Windermere embraces her fully despite her flaws. As she tells Lord Windermere, it doesn't do any good to categorize people definitively as good or bad; doing so may actually lead to genuine peril, as it did for Lady Windermere earlier in the play. Interestingly, Lord Windermere seems here to have moved his views on morality toward the kind of black-and-white thinking that his wife showed in Act I, as when he says confidently—and incorrectly—that "evil has never entered" Lady Windermere's world. It's also telling that he calls her "child"; perhaps unconsciously, he illuminates the way that Lady Windermere will always be inextricably connected to both the good and the bad in Mrs. Erlynne, even though Lady Windermere never learns about their family connection.

Given the play's larger conclusions about the ambiguous nature of good and evil, this moment also suggests that Lady Windermere has actually surpassed her husband in understanding the world accurately, in that she sees good and evil as intertwined and he does not. This truth goes against the expectation for young women to be naïve and deferential to their husbands; it seems, then, that this is also a final illustration of how conventional performances of femininity fail to capture women's nuance and wisdom.

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 I

A young woman named Lady Windermere is in the morning room of her home in London, arranging **roses** and preparing for a party that evening. Her butler, Parker, arrives to announce that Lord Darlington has come to visit her. She tells Parker that she will accept his visit and emphasizes that Parker should tell anyone who comes by that she is at home.

This first glimpse of Lady Windermere emphasizes her devotion to performing the role of femininity that her society dictates. The symbol of the roses points to careful, ladylike domesticity, while her direction to Parker shows that she's eager to demonstrate virtuous behavior. The implication is that she's not doing anything illicit with Lord Darlington; she's simply receiving any guest politely.

Lord Darlington enters and tells Lady Windermere how beautiful her **fan** is. She thanks him and says that it was a birthday present from her husband, Lord Windermere. Lord Darlington is surprised to find out that today is Lady Windermere's birthday and wishes that he had "covered the whole street in front of [her] house with flowers."

Lord Darlington's focus on conventionally feminine objects like the fan and flowers indicates that he too sees Lady Windermere according to strict gender norms.

Lady Windermere scolds Lord Darlington for having praised her too much at a gathering the night before. He confesses that he would hate for her to be mad at him, and she tells him that sometimes she thinks that he pretends to be worse than other men, when actually he is better. Lord Darlington brushes this off, saying that pretending to be bad demonstrates his true modesty.

This moment introduces two of the play central contradictions. First, Lady Windermere frames a positive form of language—compliments—as something negative, suggesting that words will prove to be untrustworthy going forward. Then, Lord Darlington flips the definitions of right and wrong by saying that seeming *bad can actually align with* being *good.*


Lord Darlington goes on to ask Lady Windermere to be "great friends" with him. She agrees that they can be friends, but only if he stops giving her extravagant compliments. Lady Windermere insists on having a clear idea of what is right and wrong, even though she knows that such distinctions aren't popular or fashionable in contemporary society.

Lady Windermere's determination to keep a clean boundary between right and wrong sets up a tension with Lord Darlington's previous statement, creating doubt around the whole idea of morality. Additionally, the mentions of "friendship" here already has clearly romantic undertones, even if Lady Windermere doesn't acknowledge them. This indicates that categories of friendship and family might prove to be less clear-cut than she expects.


Lord Darlington considers Lady Windermere's words and asks if, hypothetically, it would be wrong for a woman whose husband is unfaithful to her to be unfaithful to him in turn. Lady Windermere says in response that a woman has no excuse for bad behavior, and that she would never forgive a woman who had done something immoral. Lord Darlington disagrees, saying that life is "too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules."

Lady Windermere's words here reinforce both her commitment to black-and-white morality and the idea that women in particular are under a great deal of pressure to perform strict roles. As a "good woman" herself, she is even less forgiving of other women who fall short of this ideal.


Parker returns and announces the arrival of the Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Agatha. The Duchess greets Lord Darlington and tells him that he is "far too wicked" to talk to Agatha. The Duchess also tells Lady Windermere how much she's looking forward to the party that night, especially because she knows that Lady Windermere would only invite the right kinds of people. Lord Darlington jokes that if Lady Windermere didn't allow some scandalous people in her home, he wouldn't be able to attend. He goes on to make a cryptic remark about how marriage results in losses for wives, and then he departs without explaining himself.

The Duchess's simplistic notions of wickedness reinforce Lady Windermere's views, but because the Duchess is a comedic character, her support actually begins to weaken the strength of Lady Windermere's ideas about morality. The Duchess's visit also adds further doubt to the concept of friendship, since she's clearly there in pursuit of societal goals rather than Lady Windermere's companionship. Meanwhile, Agatha's silent elegance serves as an extreme example of the role that a young woman is expected to play and adds a comic twist to this ideal.

After Lord Darlington leaves, the Duchess of Berwick remarks that she both likes him and feels glad that he's gone. Then, she tells Lady Windermere that she feels sorry for her because of the horrid Mrs. Erlynne. When Lady Windermere says that she doesn't know who Mrs. Erlynne is, the Duchess is shocked and sends Agatha out onto the terrace so that they can talk privately.

The Duchess's words about Lord Darlington demonstrate how thin the line between goodness and wickedness really is; she both enjoys his presence and claims to be glad he's left. The Duchess's quick turn to gossip also underscores how twisted the concept of friendship quickly becomes in this play.

The Duchess of Berwick informs Lady Windermere that her husband, Lord Windermere, has been seen spending lots of time at the home of a scandalous woman named Mrs. Erlynne. The Duchess claims that many men (including her own brother Augustus) are enamored of Mrs. Erlynne, and that the Duchess's own nieces have seen Lord Windermere visiting Mrs. Erlynne many times a week. She also suspects that Lord Windermere is the one who has been giving Mrs. Erlynne the money to live like a lady. Lady Windermere says that it can't be true, but the Duchess assures her that "the whole of London knows it." She advises Lady Windermere to simply get Lord Windermere out of town for a while, as she herself had to do with her husband early in their marriage.

This moment provides a particularly clear example of how language will come to interfere with truth throughout the play. The Duchess isn't actually lying here, as readers will find out later; Lord Windermere really is doing these things. However, the conclusions that both the Duchess and Lady Windermere draw are nonetheless incorrect. The Duchess's breezy tone here also adds nuance the play's confusion of good and bad; though the news she brings seems serious, she maintains that it's easily remedied by a trip out of town. Finally, Mrs. Erlynne's success in living like a wealthy woman might shows how powerful the trappings of gender roles can be; having the money to play the part of a lady gives her a chance of actually becoming one.

Lady Windermere says again that it's impossible: she and Lord Windermere love each other, have only been married for two years, and have a six-month-old child. The Duchess of Berwick tells her sympathetically that all men are bad, even when one marries them for love. Lady Windermere thanks the Duchess for coming, but refuses to believe her. The Duchess calls Agatha inside and the Duchess remarks that she looks forward to seeing the young Australian Mr. Hopper, whom she thinks is interested in Agatha's "clever talk," at the party. She repeats her advice to take Lord Windermere out of town, and then she and Agatha depart.

The Duchess shows here that strict gender roles aren't just for women; she's readily willing to pigeonhole men as well. The mention of Agatha's "clever talk" (when in fact Agatha has barely said anything) is also a comedic way of underscoring that language doesn't always work the way that the characters expect it to.

Alone, Lady Windermere reflects that now she understands what Lord Darlington's hypothetical situation was really about. She says again that the rumors can't be true and tries to prove it by checking Lord Windermere's bank book. She sees at first that there are no payments to Mrs. Erlynne, but then she notices a second bank book, this one locked, and breaks it open to see records of many payments to Mrs. Erlynne. She throws it angrily on the ground as Lord Windermere enters.

This moment is a particularly powerful instance of how words can blur the truth and create unintended effects. The information that Lady Windermere reads in the bank book is true, but again, she misunderstands it and comes to conclusions that will only harm her.

Lord Windermere is shocked that Lady Windermere has spied on him, but Lady Windermere immediately confronts him about the rumors of Mrs. Erlynne. Though he swears that she has misunderstood and that he only loves her, she cries that she feels "stained, utterly stained." Lord Windermere says that Mrs. Erlynne has been doing her best to overcome a difficult past and that she deserves a second chance to be part of society. He admits to helping her, but only because she is otherwise alone.

Here, Lady Windermere's rigid ideas of morality make her completely unable to process the truth of what Lord Windermere is saying. She is devastated because the situation looks immoral, which keeps her from understanding what's really happening. Lord Windermere's emphasis on Mrs. Erlynne's need for friends also underscores the importance of allies in this cutthroat society, even if those friendships are uncertain.


Lady Windermere is appalled, but Lord Windermere goes on to say that she can be the one to help Mrs. Erlynne regain social status. He asks her to send Mrs. Erlynne an invitation to the party, saying that her reputation as a good woman will make other people accept Mrs. Erlynne by extension. Lady Windermere refuses and tells him that she has lots of friends to support her—he can't simply treat her however he wants.

This moment again emphasizes how important it is for women to keep up appearances and maintain a reputation of morality. If she chooses, Lady Windermere can effectively transfer her own "goodness" to Mrs. Erlynne. Lady Windermere's mention of friends here seems at first to be a way of gaining some self-determination apart from her husband, but as readers discover in the next act, her friends aren't actually as supportive as she thinks.



Lord Windermere again says that Lady Windermere doesn't know the whole situation and begs her to invite Mrs. Erlynne to the party. Lady Windermere refuses again, saying that Mrs. Erlynne's problems have nothing to do with her and that Mrs. Erlynne deserves the consequences of her scandalous past. Desperate, Lord Windermere writes an invitation himself and calls Parker in to have it sent to Mrs. Erlynne.

Lady Windermere's insistence that Mrs. Erlynne's past has nothing to do with her sets up an instance of irony that becomes clear later on. The two are actually very closely linked, which shows that the "good" Lady Windermere and the "bad" Mrs. Erlynne are in fact deeply interconnected.

Lady Windermere tells Lord Windermere that if Mrs. Erlynne comes to the party, she will insult her and hit her across the face with the **fan**. Lord Windermere begs her not to, but she ignores him and calls Parker in. Lady Windermere asks Parker to be sure that he pronounces the names very clearly when he announces the guests at the party, so that she can be certain of who's who. She swears again to embarrass Mrs. Erlynne and then exits. Alone, Lord Windermere exclaims that he doesn't know what to do; if he were to tell Lady Windermere who Mrs. Erlynne really is, "the shame would kill her."

With this threat, Lady Windermere shows how an instrument usually used to perform feminine delicacy—a fan—can easily turn into a dangerous weapon. Additionally, her request that Parker speak the names of the guests clearly shows that she still relies on language to give her a clear picture of the truth. As readers find out shortly, this perception is inaccurate; knowing Mrs. Erlynne's name is not at all the same as knowing who *she is.*


ACT II

The second act opens on Lady Windermere's party in full swing. The ballroom is beautifully decorated, and Parker announces the guests as Lady Windermere greets them. The Duchess of Berwick and Agatha are already present, and the Duchess scolds Agatha for writing the names of two younger sons on her dance card.

The Duchess's scorn for younger sons introduces the idea that a person's family of origin can be a drawback—a concept that will become important by the end of this act. Her scolding of Agatha also highlights just how constricted women's actions in London society are.

A guest named Dumby banters with several other guests, suggesting first that the ball will be the last of the season and then saying that he thinks there will be several more. Meanwhile, Mr. Hopper arrives and the Duchess of Berwick quickly arranges his dances with Agatha. Lord Windermere asks Lady Windermere to speak with him, but she brushes him off.

The way that Dumby rapidly adapts his opinions to suit his various conversation partners is a comedic example of the way that spoken language can be hollow and untrustworthy.

Augustus, the Duchess's brother, arrives and takes Lord Windermere aside to discuss Mrs. Erlynne. Augustus is enamored with Mrs. Erlynne and bemoans that fact that she doesn't have any relations to make her respectable. Augustus hints at Lord Windermere's relationship with Mrs. Erlynne, but Windermere denies that it's anything unusual. Lord Windermere then reveals that Mrs. Erlynne will be attending the party. Augustus is relieved, hoping that an association with Lady Windermere will help Mrs. Erlynne "get into this demmed thing called Society."

Augustus's concerns about Mrs. Erlynne and her lack of respectable family connections highlights how much a person's perceived goodness is entwined with their various connections to others. Especially for women, respectable connections are crucial, even if the connection is as tenuous as simply attending a party at a respectable person's house.

Cecil Graham enters, saying that he's exhausted from having dinner with his family. He teases Augustus about his past divorces and the two join the party. Lady Plymdale attempts to get Lord Windermere's attention, but he says that he has to attend to his wife. Plymdale warns him not to, saying that being kind in public will only make people think that their marriage is in trouble.

Cecil Graham's complaints here again paint the idea of family as a dull but necessary burden. For her part, Lady Plymdale adds a new twist to the idea that good and bad can easily be mistaken for one another and emphasizes that conventional gender roles only increase this risk.

At last, Lord Windermere gets Lady Windermere's attention, but he is dismayed when she refuses to reconsider her intention to humiliate Mrs. Erlynne. She moves away, taking her **fan** from Lord Darlington, who has been holding it for her. She remarks that she thinks she will want a friend after all, while Lord Windermere quietly resolves that he has to tell her the truth.

In this sequence, Lady Windermere's fan becomes a vivid representation of her attempt to use her femininity as a weapon. Letting Lord Darlington hold it suggests that she intends to use her potentially romantic connection to him as a way to control her own circumstances. She is confined by the expectations attached to being a woman, but she still finds ways to exercise agency within these strictures.

Just then, Mrs. Erlynne enters, looking beautiful and dignified. Lady Windermere drops her **fan** in shock, then bows to Mrs. Erlynne. Mrs. Erlynne returns the gesture and then moves off to join the party. Lord Darlington picks up the fan and returns it. Lord Windermere whispers to Mrs. Erlynne that it was "rash" of her to come, but she brushes him off, asking only that he introduce her to the women at the party, whom she finds more intimidating than the men. She turns to Augustus and draws him into flirtatious conversation.

Mrs. Erlynne's arrival immediately complicates both the play's presentation of morality and its treatment of gender roles. First, Lady Windermere's failure to follow through with her threat shows that her commitment to unambiguous morality does have its limits; this moment indicates that perhaps she will have to reevaluate her views. Second, Mrs. Erlynne's beauty, charm, and skill in talking to men mark her as traditionally feminine in many ways. At this point, it seems almost as though she defeats Lady Windermere by fully embracing her identity as a woman, an idea reinforced when Lady Windermere accidentally drops her fan, an object that symbolizes the performance of femininity.

Lord Darlington tells Lady Windermere that she looks pale, to which she replies: "Cowards are always pale!" The two go out to the terrace. On the way, Mrs. Erlynne stops Lady Windermere to compliment her on the beautiful party. Then, Mrs. Erlynne asks Cecil Graham to introduce her to his aunt, Lady Jedburgh. Cecil hesitantly agrees, and Mrs. Erlynne immediately charms Lady Jedburgh. Meanwhile, Dumby and Lady Plymdale gossip about who Mrs. Erlynne might be.

This series of conversations provides multiples examples of speech being used to deceive and mislead. Mrs. Erlynne uses her charming conversational skills to win over the powerful Lady Jedburgh, while Dumby leads Lady Plymdale to think that he doesn't know Mrs. Erlynne even though he actually does.

Mrs. Erlynne dances with Lord Windermere in order to make Augustus jealous, while telling Augustus that she would much rather dance with him. In passing, she also greets Dumby and apologizes for missing his recent visits. Lady Plymdale is affronted that Dumby knows Mrs. Erlynne after all, but then decides that perhaps Dumby should bring her husband along next time he goes to see Mrs. Erlynne; she suspects that doing so might get her husband to stop being annoyingly attentive. Now that she knows who Mrs. Erlynne is, Plymdale also remarks of Lady Windermere: "It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing."

The sequence sets up a contrast between Mrs. Erlynne's and Lady Windermere's differing versions of "goodness." Mrs. Erlynne successfully manipulates multiple party guests to her advantage, while Lady Windermere continues to behave in a ladylike fashion even though she's furious. Note that Lady Plymdale is actually incorrect in thinking that Lady Windermere invited Mrs. Erlynne, since it was actually Lord Windermere who did so. Nonetheless, this moment shows that among the party guests, Mrs. Erlynne seems to be coming out on top, despite Lady Windermere's best efforts.

Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington return from the terrace. Lady Windermere bemoans her humiliation over Mrs. Erlynne, and Darlington tells her that she can't stay with a husband who treats her so badly. She agrees, asking Darlington to be her friend and help her decide what to do, but he responds by immediately expressing his love and saying that "between men and women there is no friendship possible."

Darlington's confession shows how easily the idea of friendship can be corrupted for personal gain. Once he has a chance of getting what he wants, he immediately drops the pretense of friendship, even claiming that it is impossible. This incident also highlights the precarious situation that Lady Windermere finds herself in, as a woman caught between two men she seemingly can't trust.

Lady Windermere recoils and tells Lord Darlington that she does not have the courage to run away with him. Darlington tells her that she does indeed have the courage to do what she knows is right, but when she hesitates, he tells her that if she can't decide right away, she's not who he thought after all. He tells her that he will be leaving England the next day and then departs from the party. Lady Windermere cries out that she is "terribly alone."

It's interesting that Lord Darlington's ideas about right and wrong suddenly become so distinct here. He's clear about the fact that Lady Windermere's hesitation is unforgiveable, even though he expressed uncertainty in the previous act about such strict boundaries. This moment shows that it's always tempting to view morality simplistically, even for those who claim they don't. Lady Windermere's despair here also underscores the flimsiness of her friendships; where she said earlier in the day that she has many friends, she now feels that she has none.

The Duchess of Berwick enters along with several other guests. She announces to Lady Windermere that she and her nieces were completely wrong about Mrs. Erlynne; she's actually a lovely person. Mr. Hopper and Agatha then enter and announce their engagement. The Duchess is delighted, though she scolds Agatha when she finds out that she has agreed to move to Australia, saying: "Agatha, you say the most silly things possible." Throughout the scene, Agatha only says "Yes, mamma," in response to the Duchess's questions.

Mrs. Erlynne's quick transition (in the guests' opinion) from an obviously wicked person to an obviously good one demonstrates especially clearly how porous these boundaries are. The Duchess's sudden dismissal of her nieces also shows that even family bonds cannot be trusted. Finally, this moment is perhaps the clearest—and funniest—example of how meaningless the characters' reliance on language can be. The Duchess perceives Agatha as talkative and articulate and evaluates her based on her words, even though Agatha doesn't actually say anything meaningful.

The rest of the guests exit one by one, many remarking that Mrs. Erlynne is wonderful and commending Lady Windermere for having invited her. As Lady Windermere watches unnoticed, Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne talk together, with Mrs. Erlynne happily announcing her intention to accept Augustus's proposal. She reminds Lord Windermere that he has said he'll give her money with which to marry. The two go out to the terrace to keep discussing the matter, though Lord Windermere seems uneasy.

Watching Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne talk, Lady Windermere assumes that she's correct in observing their love for each other, but once again, her blind acceptance of the presence of language leads her astray. This moment also brings up the question of whether Lord Windermere is behaving morally or not; at this point, it seems impossible to tell.

Watching them go, Lady Windermere decides that she was foolish to turn Lord Darlington down and resolves to leave Lord Windermere. She writes him a letter and leaves it on the table before exiting. Mrs. Erlynne reenters and asks Parker where Lady Windermere is. He tells her that she has gone out but left a letter for Lord Windermere. Dismayed, Mrs. Erlynne exclaims to herself that history seems to be repeating itself, as she once wrote a similar letter to Lady Windermere's father.

The letter is another dramatic example of attempted communication gone awry. It is read by the wrong recipient, which, ironically, is perhaps the only reason it later produces a good outcome; if Lord Windermere had read the letter as intended, events might have gone much worse for Lady Windermere. Additionally, Mrs. Erlynne's words about history repeating itself suggest that part of the danger of family relationships is their tendency to lock a person into harmful patterns.

Mrs. Erlynne reads the letter and then crumples it as Lord Windermere enters. She tells him that Lady Windermere has gone to bed and asks him to call her carriage. After he leaves, she exclaims that she must find a way to save her child. When Augustus enters, carrying a bouquet, Mrs. Erlynne sternly tells him that he must take Lord Windermere to his club and keep him occupied. She threatens that if he doesn't, she'll never speak to him again. Confused, Augustus agrees, remarking that he "might be her husband already."

It's clear from this humorous interaction with Augustus that Mrs. Erlynne's intention to marry him is completely self-serving. This is yet another relationship based on manipulation rather than sincere feeling. Her success in this moment also depends on her ability to take aspects of predictable gender roles—even that of wife, as Augustus suggests—and use them to her advantage.

ACT III

Alone in Lord Darlington's rooms, Lady Windermere wonders when he will arrive and laments her situation. She worries that she feels "cold as a loveless thing" toward Lord Darlington, while also resenting Lord Windermere for not coming after her once he read her letter. She weighs her options, tormented, before finally settling again on running away with Lord Darlington. She feels that no woman could truly know what to do in a situation like this.

At this point, Lady Windermere is caught between two opposing ideas of what it means to behave morally. On the one hand, she wants to stick with her husband as she once believed a good woman should. On the other hand, she wonders whether to believe Lord Darlington's version of morality, in which a woman shouldn't allow herself to be dishonored. Her statement that no woman could successfully resolve a situation like this highlights the fact that woman are always caught, one way or another, between different ideas of what their proper roles are.

To Lady Windermere's surprise, Mrs. Erlynne enters and tells her that she must go home immediately because she is "on the brink of ruin." Lady Windermere is horrified to see her and tells her that while she might have gone back if Mrs. Erlynne hadn't come, she can't imagine returning to Lord Windermere having seen Mrs. Erlynne again. She accuses Mrs. Erlynne of having come on Lord Windermere's orders, with the goal of using Lady Windermere to cover up their ongoing affair. She adds that he would have come himself if he really cared about her.

Mrs. Erlynne's dramatic statement illustrates just how thin the line between the right move and the wrong move can be; Lady Windermere believes she's saving herself, but another interpretation of her situation shows that she might actually be approaching "ruin." Her reaction to Mrs. Erlynne also shows how much Lady Windermere has internalized rigid ideas of morality gender roles; she believes that a "bad" woman like Mrs. Erlynne can only behave badly.

Panicked, Mrs. Erlynne attempts to correct Lady Windermere. She says that Lord Windermere never read the letter and shows the crumpled letter to Lady Windermere before throwing it into the fire. Lady Windermere refuses to believe that the letter was truly hers and says that she can't trust Mrs. Erlynne about anything. Lady Windermere rails against her husband until Mrs. Erlynne begs her to stop saying such terrible things. She adds that it was only Lord Windermere's love for Lady Windermere that caused him to submit to Mrs. Erlynne's demands.

It's notable that Mrs. Erlynne's attempt to use the letter to prove her good intentions is a complete failure. Once again, written language fails to achieve its intended ends. The point about Lord Windermere's love having caused all of this conflict also adds a new level of confusion in the play's treatment of good and evil. It previously seemed that Lord Windermere's actions with Mrs. Erlynne were obviously wicked, but now readers get a hint that the truth may be more ambiguous.

Mrs. Erlynne continues to insist that Lord Windermere loves Lady Windermere and hasn't wronged her in any way. Lady Windermere repeats that Mrs. Erlynne is heartless and can't be trusted. In desperation, Mrs. Erlynne begs her not to ruin her "beautiful young life" by taking actions that will haunt her forever. As a final plea, she appeals to Lady Windermere's love for her young son, saying that she has to return to Lord Windermere in order to be with him. She repeats the order to "stay with the child" several times.

This moment is an especially clear illustration of how Lady Windermere's rigid view on morality causes her harm. Mrs. Erlynne is trying to tell her a comforting truth, but Lady Windermere is so convinced that she knows what's right and wrong that she can't even hear this revelation. The fact that Mrs. Erlynne finally appeals to Lady Windermere's love for her son also underscores how important family is; it is only the bond between Lady Windermere and her son that allows her to save herself. Tellingly, this turn also relies on her devotion to successfully playing the conventionally feminine role of mother.

Lady Windermere bursts into tears and, child-like, asks Mrs. Erlynne to take her home. They're preparing to leave when they hear voices coming. Mrs. Erlynne tells Lady Windermere to hide behind a curtain, which she does. It becomes clear that one of the voices belongs to Augustus, at which point Mrs. Erlynne also hides in another room. Lord Darlington, Lord Windermere, Augustus, Dumby, and Cecil Graham all enter together.

It's telling that being reminded of her child causes Lady Windermere to behave like a child herself. This change hints that it's not just individual family connections that matter; it's the full web of intergenerational bonds that has so much influence on our lives. This moment also give Mrs. Erlynne one of her only chances to behave like a mother, which bonds the women together even though Lady Windermere never finds out about their true relationship.

The men lament that the club made them leave so early. Lord Windermere thanks Lord Darlington for his hospitality but says he can't stay long. Augustus replies that Windermere must stay because there's still so much to talk about. Cecil Graham teases that of course Augustus only wants to talk about Mrs. Erlynne. Lord Windermere chides Cecil that that's not his business, but Cecil replies that he prefers other people's business to his own.

The banter among the men is an example of how talk and language can be used to manipulate situations in ways that have nothing to do with the actual content of what's being said. In particular, readers know that Augustus doesn't actually need to talk to Windermere; he's just trying to follow Mrs. Erlynne's instructions to keep Windermere busy. Cecil's comment about other people's business also reinforces the idea that friendships like these are sometimes just sources of entertainment and social jockeying rather than genuine emotional connections.

Lord Darlington comments that he doesn't much like Mrs. Erlynne, and Cecil says that he likes her much more now than he did before the party. Darlington excuses himself to sit at his desk, saying he needs to write letters before leaving in the morning. Augustus calls Mrs. Erlynne clever and expresses his happiness that she truly understands what a fool he, Augustus, is. The other men express skepticism about Mrs. Erlynne's past, but Augustus maintains that she is not "a wicked woman" as the others suggest.

Interestingly, Augustus—whom the other characters often mock for his silliness and who even calls himself a fool—is the one who actually has the best read on Mrs. Erlynne, even though he doesn't know her full backstory. He turns out to be right that she's not purely "wicked," even if she's not purely good either. This insight suggests that perhaps "foolish" perspectives are actually wiser when it comes to morality.

Lord Windermere scolds the other men for their talk of scandal, though Cecil maintains that he only talks "gossip" and not "scandal" because scandal involves morality, which makes it tedious. Lord Windermere and Augustus both decline to play cards, which makes Dumby comment that marriage "ruins a man." For his part, Cecil thinks that there's no point in behaving virtuously, because women will always think that men are bad. Lord Darlington agrees, suddenly moved to stop writing and join the others.

Cecil's definitions of gossip and scandal are humorous, but also telling. Previous acts have shown that there's no practical difference between these two forms of speech, which makes the morality that Cecil mentions seem immaterial. His point about the uselessness of virtue reinforces this idea; morality may or may not be present in a given act, but its presence makes no real difference. The men's general grumbling about marriage and women also makes it clear that in some ways, they're just as dissatisfied with standard gender norms as women are.

Lord Darlington admits that he is in love, but that the woman he loves is "a good woman" who is "not free" to love him in return. Cecil comments that he knows more good women than he would like to, while Dumby wonders aloud whether Darlington can go on loving someone who doesn't love him in return. Darlington accuses the others of being cynics, which he defines as people who "know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Cecil's comments indicate that in his opinion, good women aren't actually good; what's appealing to Darlington is unappealing to Cecil. This contrast again suggests that goodness is subjective and can't be defined in any universal way. It also illustrates how impossible it is for women to live up to normative standards of goodness when no one can agree on what it actually means for a woman to be good.

Cecil catches sight of Lady Windermere's **fan** lying on the sofa and slyly asks Lord Darlington if he is faithful to the woman he loves. When he confirms that he is, Cecil takes Augustus aside and points out the fan. The two men laugh over the contrast between Darlington's words of devotion and the clear evidence of another woman's presence. Lord Windermere stands up to leave, but before he can go, Cecil points out the fan to everyone and says it's amusing that a woman has been hiding in Darlington's rooms the whole time.

The immediate assumption that a fan indicates a woman's presence shows that for these characters, women are essentially synonymous with the props of their femininity. Additionally, Cecil's blithe revelation and amusement show that he doesn't really have much concern for his alleged friend Darlington's feelings; he's only part of this group as a way to entertain himself.

Lord Windermere recognizes the **fan** as Lady Windermere's right away. Furious, he demands an explanation from Lord Darlington, who denies knowing anything about it. As an aside to himself, Darlington notes hopefully that perhaps she did come after all. Lord Windermere threatens to search the rooms and is about to pull open the curtain behind which Lady Windermere is hiding, but just then Mrs. Erlynne rushes out of the other room. She apologizes for taking Lady Windermere's fan accidentally from the party. While the men react with confusion and amusement, Lady Windermere sneaks out from behind the curtain and exits unnoticed.

In this moment, Mrs. Erlynne relies on a gender stereotype very different from the one she embraced in the previous act. Where before she did her best to perform the part of a lady, here she takes on the role of scandalous woman instead. She doesn't have to say that she's romantically involved with Lord Darlington; her presence in his rooms is enough to make the men draw their own conclusions. By taking this action, she effectively turns around oppressive ideas of women's roles in order to achieve the liberation of one particular woman—Lady Windermere.

ACT IV

Lady Windermere is alone in her morning room the next day. She debates miserably whether to tell Lord Windermere everything that happened, and wonders whether Mrs. Erlynne already has. Her maid, Rosalie, enters and informs her that Lord Windermere did not come home until five o'clock, and that he said something about Lady Windermere's **fan**. After Rosalie leaves, Lady Windermere reflects on Mrs. Erlynne's selfless actions, saying that there is "a bitter irony in the way we talk of good and bad women."

Here, Lady Windermere recognizes at last that it doesn't make sense to talk about "good" and "bad" people when there's no way that anyone can live up to the conflicting definitions of what these terms mean. This is especially true for women, who face even stricter rules for what their roles should be. Lady Windermere's dread at the idea of telling Lord Windermere the truth also highlights how speaking about something necessarily adds an element of pain and potential confusion to it.

Lord Windermere enters and tenderly notes that Lady Windermere seems unwell. Lady Windermere says that she has something to tell him, but he cuts her off, instead insisting that they should go to the country to rest. She says that she must tell him, but asks him to promise that he will love her as he used to. He insists again that there is nothing between him and Mrs. Erlynne, and this time she says she knows he is telling the truth.

This is one of the only moments in the play when one character tells another something true and the second character actually believes this truth. Because Lord and Lady Windermere also have one of the play's only genuine, loving bonds, this moment implies that honest connections between people—as opposed to shallow ideas of friendship or family—are necessary for language to function effectively.

Lord Windermere is relieved, but he nonetheless says that Lady Windermere must never see Mrs. Erlynne again. He explains that she really is bad after all, "as bad as a woman can be." Lady Windermere protests that it's too harsh to speak like that, saying that it isn't actually possible to separate good women from bad ones. She asks to invite Mrs. Erlynne as a guest before they leave town, but Lord Windermere says that she wouldn't want to if she knew what Mrs. Erlynne had done after the party.

Once again, a misunderstanding (in this case, Lord Windermere's perception that Mrs. Erlynne is involved with Lord Darlington) leads to an unwisely rigid understanding of good and evil. Lady Windermere does her best to correct Lord Windermere's mistake here, but he doesn't listen; it seems that people will always return to rigid views of morality, especially when it comes to women, even when those views are irrational.

Just as Lady Windermere is about to make her confession, Parker enters and informs them that Mrs. Erlynne has come to return the **fan**, along with a note. Lady Windermere asks Parker to request that Mrs. Erlynne come up in person. Lord Windermere begs his wife not to speak with Mrs. Erlynne, calling her "a very dangerous woman" and saying that he must see her before Lady Windermere does. Lady Windermere asks why, but Mrs. Erlynne enters before he can answer.

Here, the return of the fan signals a return to reliance on performed femininity as a means for the women to get what they want. It's also notable that Lady Windermere rejects the written note as a means of communicating with Mrs. Erlynne; she seems to sense by this point that interpersonal connection is more reliable than isolated language.

Mrs. Erlynne apologizes for accidentally taking the **fan** the night before and says also that she wants to say goodbye before leaving town. She announces that she's going to live abroad and is not likely to see Lady Windermere again. She asks for a photograph of Lady Windermere, which Lady Windermere happily agrees to provide. When she goes to get one, Lord Windermere takes Mrs. Erlynne aside and scolds her for daring to show her face there after the events of the night before. Mrs. Erlynne laughingly tells Lord Windermere to mind his manners, then asks Lady Windermere if she has any photographs that include her son as well.

By asking for a photograph to remember Lady Windermere by, Mrs. Erlynne suggests that direct nonverbal contact with others—even if it's just through an image—is the most worthwhile way of maintaining a true connection with them. Her request that the photograph includes the baby also emphasizes again the multi-generational nature of family ties; they extend far beyond individuals and are ultimately inescapable.

Lady Windermere goes upstairs to get another photograph. Distraught, Lord Windermere tells Mrs. Erlynne that he can't stand to see her with his wife after all the trouble she has caused. He reveals to the audience that Mrs. Erlynne is actually Lady Windermere's mother, and that he has been financing her life rather than letting his wife know that her mother—whom she thinks is dead—is actually a disgraced divorcee. He scornfully reminds Mrs. Erlynne that she abandoned her daughter in favor of a lover, who later abandoned Mrs. Erlynne herself.

This revelation shows that even though family bonds are necessary in establishing an individual's reputation, they're not necessarily positive forces in a person's life. In other words, Mrs. Erlynne may be Lady Windermere's mother, but that doesn't mean that their connection is simple or painless. The information about Mrs. Erlynne scandalous past also shows how hard it is to separate good and bad when it comes to individual people. On the one hand, she created a lot of pain through her behavior, but on the other, she herself was treated very badly by the lover who deserted her.

Lord Windermere goes on to accuse Mrs. Erlynne of blackmailing him, and she agrees that she took her chance when she found out that her daughter had married a wealthy man. Disgusted, Lord Windermere says that he won't ever be able to look at the **fan** again after the events in Lord Darlington's rooms, and Mrs. Erlynne says she'll ask Lady Windermere to give her the fan. He suggests that she also take the **miniature** of a young woman that his wife treasures and kisses when she says her prayers. Mrs. Erlynne reflects that the miniature of her was made when she was younger and innocence was fashionable.

By taking advantage of her daughter's connections, Mrs. Erlynne shows how deep family ties run; she benefits from being Lady Windermere's mother even though they haven't seen each other in well over a decade. Lord Windermere's revulsion at the fan indicates that, having become more acquainted with what the strictures of women's gender roles can cause, even he prefers not to be reminded of them in the future. However, it's telling that he doesn't try to change these circumstances; he simply looks away from them. Finally, the miniature introduces the idea that people (especially as they get older and better acquainted with the world) can only be perfectly good in images, not in real life. The figurine ostensibly represents Mrs. Erlynne, but it doesn't capture her true complexity.

Mrs. Erlynne tells Lord Windermere that she has come to say goodbye to her daughter, Lady Windermere, but that she is not interested in playing "the part of a mother." She says that she's learned that the feelings of motherhood are too painful and that she prefers to let Lady Windermere go on believing that her mother is dead and "stainless." Lord Windermere is horrified, but Mrs. Erlynne refuses to repent for her actions, saying that "in real life [women] don't do such things."

Again, Mrs. Erlynne makes it clear that no real person can be as ideal as Lady Windermere's imagined mother is. By referring to "the part of a mother," she also emphasizes that both female gender roles and family relationships are performances to some extent.

Lord Windermere declares that he's going to tell his wife the truth about Mrs. Erlynne, but she says that if he does, she will make herself such a bad reputation that Lady Windermere will be miserable for the rest of her life. She claims that she does love Lady Windermere and wants the best for her, even though Lord Windermere won't believe it. She says that telling Lady Windermere her story should be her own choice, and that she'll either do it that day or never.

For women especially, reputation is everything; it's obvious here that what people believe about Mrs. Erlynne is far more relevant that who she actually is. This moment also emphasizes again how mixed up goodness and wickedness have become by this point. Telling the truth should be a good thing, but Mrs. Erlynne convincingly makes the case that it would actually be bad.

Lady Windermere reenters and gives Mrs. Erlynne a photograph of herself and her baby. She says that if the baby had been a girl, she would have named her Margaret after her mother. Mrs. Erlynne comments that her own name is Margaret too, and Lady Windermere notes that her mother is her ideal in life. Mrs. Erlynne cautions that "realities are better" than ideals, but Lady Windermere says she could never give up her ideals. She notes that her father could never bear to speak of her deceased mother and that he died of a broken heart from missing her so much. Mrs. Erlynne rises to go, and Lord Windermere goes to send for her carriage.

Despite everything she's experienced over the course of the play, Lady Windermere still can't surrender her ideal of perfect goodness. Mrs. Erlynne says that realities are better, but she also hides reality from Lady Windermere, which implies that the opposite may actually be true. Maybe rigid ideas of morality can be helpful sometimes, even if they're inaccurate. That the two women bond over their shared name also gives the impression that, in contrast to all the unreliable language throughout, names are the words that people should value the most. Of course, names are just shorthand for actual people; the play again seems to suggest that while language is necessary, it shouldn't be mistaken for reality.

With Lord Windermere gone, Lady Windermere effusively thanks Mrs. Erlynne for her sacrifice the night before. Mrs. Erlynne tells her not to speak of it and asks that she repay the debt by keeping the secret from Lord Windermere and so preserving the happiness of their marriage. Lady Windermere promises, and Mrs. Erlynne asks her also to remember her child and her role as a mother. Lady Windermere notes that she'll never again forget her role as a mother as she did the night before, and Mrs. Erlynne shudders, telling her that the night is over now. In parting, Mrs. Erlynne asks to keep the **fan** and Lady Windermere happily agrees, noting how fortunate it is that they have the same name since it's written on the fan.

The exchange of the fan here brings together the various themes of feminine performance, family connection, and the power of language. Despite their overall success determining their own fates, both women are still bound by the need to perform conventional femininity and by their inescapable roles of mother and daughter. By rejecting speech in favor of silence and celebrating only the fact of their shared name, both women again suggest that it's best to focus on actual people rather than written or spoken language.

Parker announces that the carriage has arrived and that Augustus has come to call. Augustus greets Mrs. Erlynne coldly, but she asks him to see her out and carry her new **fan**. She bids Lord and Lady Windermere farewell and exits with Augustus. Alone, Lord and Lady Windermere reflect that Mrs. Erlynne is better than they once thought and reaffirm their own love for each other. Lady Windermere looks forward to seeing the garden of **roses** at their house in the country.

In the end, both Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere take refuge in the trappings of conventional femininity as they affirm their commitments to their male partners. Mrs. Erlynne uses the fan to win back Augustus's affection, while Lady Windermere dreams of the roses that await her in the country with Lord Windermere.

Augustus reenters and says that Mrs. Erlynne explained everything, which startles both Lord Windermere and Lady Windermere. He explains that Mrs. Erlynne was actually looking for him when she went to Lord Darlington's rooms, having checked at the club first. She wanted to relieve the suspense and accept his proposal, and he says that all of the men "behaved brutally to her." Augustus finishes by saying that he plans to move away from England with Mrs. Erlynne and that he's glad to do it because he's "sick of it all." Lord Windermere remarks that Augustus is marrying "a very clever woman," and Lady Windermere adds that she's "a very good woman."

In the play's closing line, Lady Windermere hints a deeper understanding of morality than seemed possible in Act I. She has seen more (though not all) of Mrs. Erlynne's complexity, and she still deems her good. Ultimately, Mrs. Erlynne also receives the approval of Augustus and Lord Windermere, even though she wrongs them both along the way. For a woman in such a restrictive society, it seems, goodness requires some wickedness as well, and it may never be possible to decide whether one person is truly good or bad.

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