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## **«Does Lady Windermere meet her own moral standards?»**

(Научная работа по английскому языку)

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## Introduction

As I am interested in English learning I have always wanted to read books in original. My teacher advised me to start with Oscar Wilde's play "Lady Windermere's Fan". I liked the book very much. I thought it was serious, clever and with moments to tug the heart strings. But some scenes in the play were not quite clear to me, for example, I could not understand the main character's inappropriate behaviour at her husband and child. I decided to study the play more deeply and needed to do some research. I found out that "Lady Windermere's Fan" was Oscar Wilde's first produced play, and it was an instant success on the London stage. Chronicling a series of misunderstandings and deceptions in the high society world of Victorian London, audiences were charmed by Wilde's trademark wit and intelligence. Many critics have argued that Wilde failed to escape the influence of his contemporaries. In his study, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, Kerry Powell discusses Wilde's plays and lists several plays from the 1890s from which Wilde borrowed material. Powell proposes that Wilde "combats" popular nineteenth-century drama and its conventions. Similarly to Powell, St John Hankin, in his 1912 study "Wilde as Dramatist," discusses how Wilde's eagerness to succeed in popular theatre caused him to adapt to nineteenth-century theatrical conventions: "He (Wilde) looked around him at the kind of stuff which other playwrights were making money by, examined it with contemptuous acumen, saw how it was done – and went and did it likewise"<sup>1</sup>. Some critics, however, do see the more radical aspects of Wilde's work. Katharine Worth's study, *Oscar Wilde*, acknowledges Wilde's sympathies for the role of women in England. The critic suggests that Wilde's plays undermine "the Victorian hierarchy" and therefore show his radical ideas about the position of women in society. In her 1996 study, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Sos Eltis suggests that Wilde "was a political radical, a harsh critic of his society and its moral and sexual laws".<sup>2</sup> The critic discusses a variety of Wilde's plays and shows how Wilde's careful revisions of his characters, from conventional to confrontational, contributed to his criticism on society.

The theme of my research is "Does Lady Windermere meet her own moral standards?" Without no doubt, the discourse about moral and family values has been spoken for many centuries. It is still actual nowadays as it is generally accepted that now families are not as close as they used to be. The importance of moral values in life is something nobody can honestly disagree with, although today it's a popular practice. Many famous film and music stars, politicians, and other influential people talk about liberal values – freedom of expression, religious beliefs, a hedonistic

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<sup>1</sup> <http://Www.google.de/bingweb.binghamton.edu/ccarpen/wilde.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.google.de/oxfordscholarship.com/view>

way of life, and so on. Their argument is that personal freedom is the most important value to fight for! Nobody can make you do what you do not want to do, so you are free to be cruel or kind, honest, or not – it's your own choice, and everyone should appreciate it. That's why it is acceptable to abuse alcohol, take drugs, and be impolite, rude or even cruel – if you want to behave like that, it's your right. Liberty is the only value!

You cannot but agree that throughout history moral and family values have been the basis of people's life. I personally think that having a place to go - is a home, having someone to love - is a family, having both - is a blessing. For me now, when both parents in families work and see their children less than it used to be in the past, family means love, trust, communication, being together, sharing, understanding, listening and caring. Life is full of difficulties and challenges, and moral and family values help people rise above difficulties and keep moving forward. Love, honesty, loyalty are all-time subjects that merit people's respect and admiration.

This research paper aims to answer two questions. First, does Lady Windermere, the main character of O. Wilde's comedy "Lady Windermere's Fan" meet her own moral standards? Second, what is my contemporaries' attitude to family values? The objectives of the study are as follows:

Firstly, to define what morality and moral standards mean;

Secondly, to gain a profound knowledge of the play's background and Wilde's intention in writing the play.

Thirdly, to get a clear picture of the moral and value system of the Victorian era and the position of Victorian women in society.

Fourthly, to find out how Lady Windermere's behaviour in the play complies with her moral standards and how far she succeeds in her role as a good woman, wife and mother.

Fifthly, to carry out research into a group of people's attitude to moral values.

## Chapter 1. Historical context

### 1.1 What are *moral standards*?

According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English morality, moral standards, morals* stand for beliefs or ideas about what is right and wrong and about how people should behave. Due to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary moral standards, morals* mean principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. The origin of the word dates back to late Middle English: from Old French *moralite* or late Latin *moralitas*, from Latin *moralis* from *mos, mor-* 'custom', (plural) *mores* 'morals'. As a noun the word was first used to translate Latin *Moralia*, the title of St Gregory the Great's moral exposition of the Book of Job, and was subsequently applied to the works of various classical writers. Throughout the history of recorded literature, the majority of fictional writing has served not only to entertain but also to instruct, inform or improve their audiences or readership. In classical drama, for example, the role of the chorus was to comment on the proceedings and draw out a message for the audience to take away with them; while the novels of Charles Dickens are a vehicle for morals regarding the social and economic system of Victorian Britain. Morals have typically been more obvious in children's literature, sometimes even being introduced with the phrase: "The moral of the story is ...". Aesop's Fables are the most famous of stories with strong moral conclusions.

*Victorian morality* is a distillation of the moral views of people living at the time of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901) and of the moral climate of the UK throughout the 19th century in general, which contrasted greatly with the morality of the previous Georgian period. Victorian morality can describe any set of values that espouse sexual restraint, low tolerance of crime and a strict social code of conduct. Due to the prominence of the British Empire, many of these values were spread across the world.

The term "Victorian" was first used during The Great Exhibition in London (1851), where Victorian inventions and morals were shown to the world. Victorian values were developed in all facets of Victorian living. The morality and values of the Victorians can be classed to Religion, Morality, Elitism, Industrialism and Improvement. These values take root in Victorian morality, creating an overall change in the British Empire. Historians now regard the Victorian era as a time of many contradictions, such as the widespread cultivation of an outward appearance of dignity and restraint together with the prevalence of social phenomena such as prostitution and child labour. A plethora of social movements arose from attempts to improve the prevailing harsh living conditions for many under a rigid class system.

## 1.2 O. Wilde and Victorian society

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854. It was right in the time when Queen Victoria (1837 -1900) reigned in Great Britain. Today this time is known as the Victorian era. Nowadays historians describe the Victorian era “as a time of many contradictions”. It was a society that preached high moral values and at the same time neglected them under the surface. Victorian values centered around the perceived decency and the wholesomeness of middle class Victorian family life; with the hardworking, caring father at the head who provided for his family, a selfless mother who put her family before herself. Women were feeble creatures needing male protection. It was a time of terrible poverty, many families moved to the cities as a result of the industrial revolution, and while there were charities which offered help the rather disapproving morality of the Victorians meant that the poor were divided in to deserving and undeserving poor. Those who the charitable administrators felt had brought their misfortune on themselves were left without aid. A strict and self denying moral code meant that sexual self restraint was the ideal.

“ The apparent contradiction between the widespread cultivation of an outward appearance of dignity and restraint and the prevalence of social phenomena that included prostitution, child labour and an imperialist colonizing economy were two sides of the same coin.”<sup>3</sup>

Especially for a neoteric artist like Wilde it was very difficult to live in such a restraining age. He always struggled with the contemporary value system - the superficiality and hypocrisy of which he clearly understood and criticized and still could not turn his back to. All his life he tried to adapt himself to society and wanted to become an accepted part of it. Yet he never succeeded in doing so. More than his inconvenient artistic and ethical persuasions it was his scandalous sexual behaviour that worked against him. In fact he had to spend two years in prison for homosexuality which was a serious crime at that time. So all his life, his attempts to fit into society were mostly answered with exclusion.

To sum up, Victorian society with its double standards was deceitful and hypocritical. People were judged by their wealth and the social position of their families. It can be easily understood why Wilde’s attitude towards society became biting cynicism over time.

### 1.2 Victorian England and her women.

It takes a considerable leap of the imagination for a woman of the 21st century to realise what her life would have been like had she been born 150 years ago. We take for granted nowadays that almost any woman can have a career if she applies herself. We take for granted that women can

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<sup>3</sup> ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian\\_morality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_morality), women 9.2.2006)

choose whether or not to marry, and whether or not to have children, and how many.

Women of the mid-19th century had no such choices. Most lived in a state little better than slavery. They had to obey men, because in most cases men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence. A wealthy widow or spinster was a lucky exception. A woman who remained single would attract social disapproval and pity. She could not have children or cohabit with a man: the social penalties were simply too high.

Women in Victorian England were believed to be inferior to men; they were subjected to their men's authority in many ways and their legal status was similar to that of children. Their fathers, husbands or other male relatives were their legal representatives and it was men who were in charge of women's property for almost all the nineteenth century. Women were not allowed to vote and were not legal guardians of their children. A Victorian woman would be stoical, motherly, submissive and loyal. Innocence and inexperience and a cultivated fragility were the characteristic attributes of the Victorian girl. The division of sexes was clear; men and women knew that their roles were different and accepted that they were, even within marriage, obliged them to lead separate and unequal lives until they died.

The man was the bread-winner; the woman was confined to domesticity. As domestic beings, most women were denied education because it was considered unnecessary. Women were not found in professions or skilled trade; if they worked, they worked in jobs where no higher education was required. At home they were expected to be amiable companions and not partners with whom men would discuss business or politics.

Unmarried women, failing their mission to bring up a new generation of offspring, were considered conspicuous and a danger to the stability of society, in which the family unit was the foundation stone. However, the status of women and their rights and duties cannot be generalized since they varied according to the social class a woman came from.

Wilde's opinion of women is clearly reflected in his work. The women in his plays are mostly plain, indifferent stereotyped creatures living ordinary lives. "Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner."<sup>4</sup> In the Victorian era a woman's life was strictly defined by her responsibilities as a wife and mother. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, adultery was one of the worst crimes a woman could commit. Women had to be held accountable, while the men could not really be blamed for it. Once led astray, she was the fallen

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<sup>4</sup> Beckson, Karl, *The Critical Heritage*. Oscar Wilde, p. 119

woman, and nothing could reconcile that till she died. As the “weaker” sex most women lived a life of restraint and oppression in the shade of men.

To summarize, the main role of every Victorian woman was the role of an obedient daughter before her marriage and whose main target in life was finding a suitable husband; being married, she supposed to be the person who made the home and who created the atmosphere of comfort for her husband; also her life was strictly defined by her responsibilities as a mother.

### **1.3 Wilde's social comedies.**

A comedy is a play with happy ending and aims at making people laugh at certain follies, vanities, hypocrisies and weaknesses of people for reforming society. Wilde wrote his social comedies mainly for commercial reasons. Consequentially they were of relatively slight significance to him. He did not hesitate to borrow and transform material from other plays for his work and to him as a master of language the plot of a play was far less important than its language. The plays can be understood as satires on the morals of Victorian society in which he lived. They were modern value critique on a society that was highly selfrightous and hypocritical. His intention was to indulge his audience and to mock it at the same time. Therefore he mercilessly exposed his audience’s superficiality and lack of moral substance while he presented to them such flattering images of themselves that they had to feel offended and pacified all at once. The plays were written to entertain and amuse an audience consisting of London’s upper class-people who were influential, educated and wealthy. This was the only part of society in which he was interested as an audience. He had to mind carefully how to address this audience when he wanted to meet their taste with his plays. They met the conventions of the time and due to that draw lively portraits of the British society in which Wilde lived. Wilde was not a moralist, but an artist. He himself negated to have any interest in moralizing through his works. As a forefighter of aestheticism he created art for art’s sake. Ethical attitudes and “aesthetic”ones do not go together. That is why he never tried to reform the moral standards of his time, but merely attempted to play with them in his art. Clement Scott describes him as “a cynic of deeper significance”. All in all it looks as if Wilde was born in the wrong age - born before his time. Society simply was not ready for his talent and art yet.

Oscar Wilde’s play “*Lady Windermere’s Fan*“, first produced on 22 February 1892, was his first public success as a playwright. Various others, such as “*A Woman of no Importance*” or “*An Ideal Husband*”, followed it in an equally successful manner. He placed this four-act play into a setting which must have made his audience feel quite at home: London’s upper class. “*Lady Windermere’s Fan*” tells the story of Lady Windermere, a good Victorian woman whose secure little world becomes threatened by an unexpected crisis in her life just on the day of her twenty-first birthday. On that day her mother, Mrs Erlynne, a fallen woman who was commonly believed to be



dead reappears in her life after twenty years of separation. Out of a misunderstanding Lady Windermere, who does not know Mrs Erlynne's true identity, suspects her husband to have an affair with her and nearly abandons her home and child. But Mrs Erlynne can convince her daughter to return back home and the play ends in supposedly harmony: The Windermers decide to forget about the troubles of the last twenty-four hours and go on with their perfect married-life as before. Lady Windermere will never get to know the truth about her mother and her mother succeeds in her plan to reenter society.

The plot is rather simple and gives the impression to be a very unrealistic imitation of life. It appears to be artificially cramped together to match Wilde's idea of the story he initially intended to write. A. B. Walkley (1855-1926), a long and continue admirer of O. Wilde's plays, wrote in a critic about the play: "It is by no means a good play: its plot is always thin, often stale; indeed it is full of faults. Yet it is a good play for it carries you along from start to finish without boring you for a single moment."<sup>5</sup> Wilde himself admitted that he could not "get a grip of the play" while he was still in the progress of writing it. He also said "I can't get my people real." This did not belittle the play's success though, and "*Lady Windermere's Fan*" ranks among Wilde's most successful and well-known plays.

To conclude, as Wilde lived for art, his works are a mirror of his own disappointment and frustration about the contemporary value system.

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<sup>5</sup> Walkey B.A. The Critical Heritage. 1892, p.119

## Chapter 2. Lady Windermere and her moral standards

*“It is absurd to divide people into good and bad.*

*People are either charming or tedious”*

O. Wilde

### 2.1 Is she a young Puritan and a good woman?

According to Puritans, women were to demonstrate religious piety and obedience under male authority while husbands were the spiritual head of the household. The role Puritan women played by the 16th or 17th century was to raise their kids right and teach them moral values. They also would cook, clean, and sew. If they didn't do what they were supposed to do, they became outcasts in the society.

Right at the beginning of the play the audience is confronted with Lady Windermere and everything one gets to know about her is highly positive: the way she talks, the way she acts, the way she looks. She shares Puritan values and is a young, beautiful lady who lives her life as a strict upholder of moral standards. Furthermore she is married and has a six-month-old child. In her conversation with Lord Darlington in Act One she presents herself as a faithful wife who, for example, does not even want her admirer to pay her compliments. She says about herself: “I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it.”<sup>6</sup>

She asserts that living would be much easier if it was settled by “hard -and -fast rules” and therefore her concept of good and bad is very simple. The ideal Victorian woman! Everything she says sounds exceedingly virtuous and conventional. And it is not only what she says, but also what the other characters say about her that helps her to win the audience’s sympathy. No character in the play questions her goodness. She is praised for her morality and poses a role model for everybody around her. It is obvious to everybody that she is what the world calls a “good woman”.

Already in the first act the audience gets a clear picture of what Lady Windermere is like and how she thinks about life. But then in the progression of the play she is being tested on her goodness. In how far does she meet her own moral standards when she decides to leave her husband? Are her justifications anything but excuses for her own weakness? Can she be an exception of her own rules without breaking them?

In the centre of the play stands the question of what is good and what is bad. Lady Windermere follows decorous the conventions of her time. What society accepts as good is good, and what society takes for bad must be bad. Her concept of good and bad is neatly set out and

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<sup>6</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., “Manager” 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 158

requires no further definition. Virtue is virtue, vice is vice. Therefore she always acts in the conviction to be right. This self-righteousness lets her become judgemental and intolerant towards other people who do not apply the same rules to their lives as she does. As a designating Puritan she believes in Christian values such as marriage and family coherence. Puritans believed in self-determination, that each has the ability to do good. That is what she expects every body including herself to act on. She looks on life through the eyes of Lady Julia, her father's elder sister who brought her up and who "allowed of no compromise". "I allow of none", she proudly tells her admirer Lord Darlington. To his question whether she really thinks "that women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?" her response is "I think they should never be forgiven"<sup>7</sup>. This lack of empathy is surprising since she as a "good Puritan" woman should be merciful, kind and forgiving. But these virtues seem to be unknown to her. She is rather a cold and unforgiving moralist.

Within twenty-four hours Lady Windermere's naive view on the world is challenged by a strange quirk of fate which nearly ruins her and her family. Lady Windermere has lived an extremely sheltered life until Mrs Erlynne appeared in it. She has never been in a need to question any of her beliefs because she has never been in a situation that required it. She might have hard and fast rules for her life but most of the things she says sound immature, sophomoric and ill-conceived. These stiff doctrines, which help her to understand life, have never been testing for her before her twenty-first birthday. Before that Lady Windermere lived in a protecting shell which did not let anything bad come near her.

On the one hand, she is being introduced as a character that at first glance seems to be very serious and stands up for her own beliefs, for example, when she rebukes Lord Darlington in Act One about his vicious lifestyle. She has a talent for grandiose remarks that seem eminently weighty such as her criticism on society that "Nowadays people seem to look on life as a speculation. It is not a speculation. It is a sacrament. Its ideal is Love. Its purification is sacrifice."<sup>8</sup> But on the other hand, her behaviour throughout the play is immature and unsteady. Indeed she terms herself a "pale coward" right at the beginning when she fails to redeem her forewarning to strike Mrs Erlynne across the face with her birthday-fan if she was to appear at the party. Another example of her weakness is given when she admits to Lord Darlington in Act Two "I am afraid of being myself." Her self-confident appearance seems to be a deceiving facade. The whole situation on her birthday is overcharging for her. So the rash decision of leaving her husband is nothing but a panicky reaction to something that she has never expected to happen in her own life. All her life she has

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<sup>7</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 160

<sup>8</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 158

been spoon-fed - first by her aunt and later by her husband. She has never been encouraged to have a mind of her own and to be a strong, independent individual. Nevertheless, Lady Windermere is an intelligent young woman. In her conversations with Lord Darlington she displays more sense for reality than one would trust her to have and she proves that she is not as ignorant as her husband assumes her to be. Still she is unable to understand that nothing is absolutely true and that things can only be judged in comparison with one another. Her unworldly innocence makes her think that she lives a blameless life. She does not realize that nobody is ever blameless and that true goodness only reveals itself when it is being tested.

Lady Windermere feels safe in the role of a Puritan woman but in the progression of the play her education in moral feeling begins and she has to learn that life is not as easy as she always thought is to be. She gets her eyes opened to a side of life that she did not know of before. "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."<sup>9</sup>

To conclude, Lady Windermere's character was shown as a reflection of Victorian society's double standards. On the one hand, she is a Puritan woman with strict rules of behaviour and a good woman who lived in a protecting shell which did not let anything bad come near her. On the other hand, she is unable to correspond her own moral standards. Her unworldly innocence makes her think that she lives a blameless life. She does not realize that nobody is ever blameless and that true goodness only reveals itself when it is being tested.

## **2.2 Is she a good wife?**

In the play Lord and Lady Windermere are the only two characters who are seriously concerned about morals and virtues. They stand in contrast to a selection of cynics and pragmatics. Nobody but them try to uphold the idealism of a harmonical marriage life built upon love and respect. All the other characters lost this romantic view on marriage. Duchess of Berwick even advises Lady Windermere to accept her husband's infidelity as an inevitable part of marriage. This clearly describes the Victorian role of a female in society: suffer and be still. Lady Windermere as a young idealistic bride who believes in an equal law of fidelity for both husband and wife. She has perfect confidence in her husband but when that confidence is betrayed she acts on the principle "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" and wild with jealousy leaves her husband in the heat of the moment. This reaction is not compatible at all with her own statement about a wife's duty toward her husband even if he committed adultery in the conversation with Lord Darlington in Act One just before she gets to know about her own husband's fault. Afterwards she experiences that there is a significant difference between philosophizing about morals and actually applying them in a testing

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<sup>9</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 228

situation on one's own action. So when she leaves her husband, all she said at the beginning about her moral standards suddenly appears to be just as hypocritical as the rest of society is. At that moment she denies herself and fails to fulfill these standards. She, who "allows of no compromise" suddenly begins to understand that life is far too complex to be lived without compromises.

Lord Windermere tries to protect his wife from every evil. He tries to preserve her innocence and purity which he loves so much about her. That is why he lets himself be blackmailed by Mrs Erlynne, that is why he lies to Margaret about her mother. He wants to save his wife from the truth about her parentage because it would devastate her in his opinion. And indeed in Act Four she says to Mrs Erlynne " We all have ideals in life. At least we all should have. Mine is my mother. If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything."<sup>10</sup> So Lord Windermere pays the price of making himself look guilty to protect his wife from reality. He treats his wife like a child and shows in his behaviour a perfectly fine example of a Victorian husband. He does not see an equated partner in her but an inferior child that needs his protection and guidance. This, of course, does not preclude that he loves her but it certainly underemines the set gender roles of the time and excuses Lady Windermere in a sense for her naivty and lack of tolerance towards people of different moral understanding from her own.

Lord Windermere clearly believes that he is fulfilling the role of the protective male and allknowing guardian to his wife and in this presumption ironically emphasizes his own lack of understanding in the end of the play when he requires the protection of the two women to keep the stainless picture of his wife. His evaluation of his wife is very narrowed. He fancies her incapable of any wrong and it seems as if he needs this picture to love her. The truth about the doubtful night would have a disenchanting effect on him. So Mrs Erlynne beseeches Lady Windermere never to tell her husband the truth with the explanation that "Love is easily killed."<sup>11</sup> Lord Windermere would not be able to fully forgive his wife. So he needs to be protected from the full knowledge of the facts by his wife's pretended ignorance about her own trespass, while she achieves a much better understanding of the situation. Throughout the play one gets the impression that Lord Windermere regresses in his moral understanding while his wife further develops hers:

"Lord Windermere: 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 might live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pity and precipice".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 242

<sup>11</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 244

<sup>12</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 247

In the end he adapts her strict rules and she dissociates from them. Lord Windermere who at the beginning tries to convince his wife of Mrs Erlynne's noble character, suddenly sees in her a purely evil woman who cannot be trusted. In contrast to that, after being saved by her, Lady Windermere thinks that she totally misjudged Mrs Erlynne and now opines her to be a truly good person. "She is better than I am." So in the end of the play Lord Windermere and his wife have ironically swapped their opinions about Mrs Erlynne. First he implores his wife to "save" Mrs Erlynne and later it turns out that it was Mrs Erlynne who has "saved" his wife's honour.

To summarize, Lady Windermere corresponds hypocritical rules of behavior in Victorian society. Being naive and immature, she was ready to leave her husband for Lord Darlington and in that way she failed to be a good wife to Lord Windermere. But thanks to favourable circumstances she returned to her family and became more mature in her feelings and judgment about life.

### **2.3 Is she a good mother?**

In the entire play Lady Windermere never talks about her child spontaneously. Only once when Mrs Erlynne tries to convince her of her maternal duty this subject is touched. Mrs Erlynne's failure as a mother is one of the main topics of the play so it is quite astonishing that Lady Windermere's mother's role remains nearly untreated. Ironically in Act Four Lord Windermere reproaches Mrs Erlynne for her mistake of leaving her child behind when she left her husband unknowing that his own wife would have done just the same only a few hours earlier. In fact only thanks to Mrs Erlynne Lady Windermere's fault is not even detected. But of course this does not discharge her of the guilt. When she sits in Lord Darlington's rooms right after she left home she does not think of anything but her own wellbeing. In this scene it becomes most evident how selfish and self-righteous Lady Windermere really is. She does not spend a single thought on her child. Is this what a good woman would do to her child?

To conclude, as a mother she fails just as her own mother failed. If she did not return to her husband, her child would have had the same destiny as she had it: a motherless upbringing and uncertainty about her parentage.

### **2.4 Is she better than her mother?**

Lady Windermere makes a bogeyman out of Mrs Erlynne from the first time on she hears something about her. She judges on what she is told about this doubtful "woman with a past" by Duchess of Berwick. She has never seen her before but does not even consider this first judgement to be wrong. To her Mrs Erlynne is the enemy and only when Mrs Erlynne saves her from disgrace she is ready to change this opinion.

Ironically, Lady Windermere does not realize that Mrs Erlynne did nothing else but what she herself was about to commit by leaving her husband. Strictly spoken they are both adulteresses. So

right at the beginning she speaks out an accusation which could be her own only a few scenes later. By condemning her mother she condemns herself in advance and gambles away the chance to moderate her own fault. She breaks her own strict rules and does not pay the price she demands of an adulterous woman to pay. Therefore when she says “If a woman really repents, she never wishes to return to the society that has made or seen her ruin” she contradicts in her own action by pleading Mrs Erlynne in Act Three to bring her back home. The difference between the two women is that Mrs Erlynne is ready to take the consequences for her actions while Lady Windermere is unable to do so. Mrs Erlynne also emphasises her daughter’s weak nature in the Third Act when she says “You haven’t got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage. You couldn’t stand dishonour.”<sup>13</sup> So Lady Windermere is fortunate enough to be prevented from the whole implementation while her mother paid the total price for her misdoing. As eager as she was to judge Mrs Erlynne at the beginning of the play for her dubious past, she justifies her own adultery when she sits in Lord Darlington’s rooms in Act Three: “Which is the worst, I wonder, to be at the mercy of a man who loves one, or the wife of a man who in one’s own house dishonours one?”<sup>14</sup> Now the question raises whether Lady Windermere is still any better than her mother. Shall she get credit for her return back home? Does her youth and lack of experience excuse her for her violation of Victorian morality? Is her reaction not understandable with regard to her situation? Would a woman nowadays not act likewise when she was to suspect her husband of infidelity? The play does not give much information about the further particulars of Mrs Erlynne’s motivations to leave her husband, but we know that she had a lover who abandoned her after she had abandoned her family. Lady Windermere though does not decide to leave her husband for another man but simply in despair. No other reason can be imputed to her. She was never seriously interested in Lord Darlington and before Mrs Erlynne tries to convince her to go back home she has already made this decision for herself.

She never intended to leave her husband and is totally satisfied with her life until she finds out the rumors about her husband’s affair. This is an important difference between the two women. Lady Windermere might have a very simple concept of good and bad. She surely is very judgemental and self-righteous but she also has a true desire to live a moral life. Mrs Erlynne on the contrary is not interested in morals. She is a realist and does not regret her bad actions because of a guilty conscience but because of disadvantages and trials she had to go through afterwards. In Act Four she says “What consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., “Manager” 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 213

<sup>14</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., “Manager” 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 206

<sup>15</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., “Manager” 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 240

Lady Windermere has a very different way to deal with her fault. She feels guilty and deeply regrets her action. For her it is as if Mrs Erlynne evolves from a devil to an rescuing angle at the moment she helps her to escape from Lord Darlington's apartment. She feels how much she is in her debt. It seems to be the first time in her life that she really feels guilty about something and realizes that she herself has committed a sin. This experience humbles her and gives her an important lesson on her own "goodness". The relationship of the two women is very peculiar. Lady Windermere does not find out Mrs Erlynne's true identity at all, still she helps her unknowingly to succeed in reentering society while Mrs Erlynne helps her daughter to save her marriage and remain in her social state. Only because of the appearance of Mrs Erlynne it becomes necessary for her to question her own moral standards and only because of her she sees herself confronted with a situation that probably would never have occurred otherwise in her life.

In conclusion, Lady Windermere is an immature woman who acts spontaneously leaving her family and is unable to take the consequences for her actions. In this way she is better than her mother who had left her child and husband for life pleasure.



### **Chapter 3 People's attitudes towards moral principles nowadays**

Every society has its own system of moral norms and values that are an integral part of spiritual life of its members. Moral values consist of public opinions about good and evil, justice and injustice, love, happiness, sense of duty, honour and conscience. Today our society seems to be complex and changeable. Many people believe that it suffers a loss of integrity and invariability of moral values. They say that young people's motives are hardly guided today by moral standards of honesty, purity, selflessness and love for others. Others believe that, on the contrary, people in the past were more hypocritical. They lived by double standards: they supported a high moral standards in words but in reality they had no moral principles at all. The question is: do we adhere to moral standards today?

To find out the answer to this question I decided to carry out some research. I created two questionnaires which were offered to 25 boys and 25 girls. Each contained 9 similar multiple-choice questions concerning moral values on love, marriage, family unit, parental responsibility.

The survey shows that 100% of girls plan to have their own family. Despite the fact that 15 respondents (60%) agree that moral standards are not as high as they used to be in the past, all of the girls view the marriage very seriously: they consider love, respect and mutual understanding as very important things in family relations and agree that both the husband and the wife must share household duties. 22 respondents would not accept any relationship with a married man and only 5 girls (20%) could leave their husbands for love. They also make high demands of their future husbands: 20 girls (80% of respondents) could not forgive their husbands' betrayal (only 5 girls (20%) found difficulty in replying), 23 respondents (92%) think that the husband must bring up his children along with his wife. All of the girls are ready to feel responsibility for the child's safety: none of the girls (100% of respondents) would leave their child even for love.

The results of the questionnaire for boys shows that 88% of respondents (22 boys) plan to have their own family. Though 80% of respondents (20 boys) agree that moral standards are lower nowadays, they consider love, respect and mutual understanding the most important things in the family life. Like the girls all of them (100%) could not forgive their wives' breach of faith. 20 boys (80%) could not leave a child for love. Concerning other aspects of morality and family affairs the boys showed lower readiness and responsibility. 23 respondents (92%) disagree to share household duties and 10 respondents (40%) - parental duties. 12 boys replied that being married, they could have an affair with another woman.

To sum up, stable moral standards and family values are still actual nowadays. There are different views on some aspects of life on the part of boys and girls but such feelings as love, respect and parental responsibility appear stable and unshakable.

## **Conclusions**

Oscar Wilde's play played an important role in history of English literature. It marked the end of more than a hundred-year-old crisis of English drama that came after Richard Sheridan's play "The School of Scandal" in 1777. During the whole XIX century there was dominant influence of French melodrama on the English stage. Wilde and later B. Shaw became authentic reformers of English drama having established on it intellectual problem drama.

In "Lady Windermere's Fan", Oscar Wilde criticized the society he lived in. Much of his comments on traditional gender roles in Victorian era relate to the themes of his own life, such as the perfection that was demanded of people. Wilde grew up in the Victorian period when gender roles were clear-cut. Men took care of the public task and women were confined to the home. From a young age onwards, Wilde chose not to follow conventions. During his marriage he started leading a double life; on the one hand he was a loving father, on the other hand he had romantic relations with young men. Wilde felt society forced him to lead this secret life, since homosexuality was forbidden.

Much of his opinion on society and its ideals can be found in his play. The author displayed a Victorian woman who had got a sheltered upbringing and who had been taught to "be the guardian of moral, spiritual and domestic values". In the play, O. Wilde showed that sheltering of women from real life, their holding on to artificial ideas would lead to a blind alley. Thus Lady Windermere, who had little experience of deception and wrongdoing, was foolishly ready to believe what she was told by others. She believed gossip about her husband and Mrs. Erlynne and almost left her family for a man who she did not love at all. So she failed to be a good and true wife.

Because Lady Windermere was kept ignorant, her world was turned upside down. When she considered leaving her husband, she forgot about her maternal duty and was ready to leave her small child. She did not even remember that she herself was brought up without her mother and was deprived of her mother's love. Lady Windermere only thought about her insulted feelings and the wish to avoid further troubles. In this case she failed to be a good mother.

Wilde believed society had to accept that no one is perfect in order to create a better understanding for one another. At first, Lady Windermere's concept of goodness was in a way of narrow-minded. She had extremely strict moral standards and tended to regard pleasure as a sin. In her opinion, women who sinned once should never be forgiven. Lady Windermere's moral standards did not change in the play but she became more open and developed a new understanding,

a new tolerance towards things. She learnt to question her judgment. Within twenty-four hours she begins to see that life is far more complex and difficult to be tamed by her hard-and-fast rules. After hard life circumstances, when Mrs. Erlynne had saved the situation at the cost of her own reputation, Lady Windermere progressed in her development as a good woman. So she said to her husband, "I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good woman may have terrible things in them... Bad woman may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice."<sup>16</sup>

In the title of the play itself there is the writer's clever use of hidden irony and paradox. The fan of Lady Windermere is a kind of character. It was her husband's present to her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and at first it symbolizes family happiness. Then, when Lady Windermere learnt about Lord Windermere's connection with Mrs Erlynne, it becomes a symbol of revenge: Lady Windermere was going to strike Mrs Erlynne across the face with it. After that Lord Widermere found the fan in Lord Darlington flat and it symbolizes faithlessness. In the final scene the fan becomes a symbol of reconciliation: Lady Windermere gave it to Mrs Erlynne and stood up for her before Lord Windermere.

Now, concerning the question whether Lady Windermere meet her moral standards my conclusions can be summarized as follows: in the words of Oscar Wilde, it is absurd to divide people into good and bad, they are either charming or tedious. To paraphrase the author, most people are neither bad apples nor good eggs, but soft fruit that can turn from ripe to rotten or green fruit that can grow ripe. And so is Lady Windermere. On the one hand, she does not meet her standards as she once gave up her moral principles. But on the other hand, after a talk with Mrs Erlynne she repented of her deed and understood that her destiny was inseparable from the roles of wife and mother. More than that, at the end of the play she became purer, nobler and more sympathetic as she was earlier.

Regarding the question of what is young people's attitude to moral and family values there are some important things that I can conclude. Though many young people agree that moral standards are lower nowadays, most girls and a certain part of boys would like to adhere to stable family values and moral principles.

No doubt people need moral rearmament and should preserve moral values if they don't want to turn into savage animals and be left to their own devices. Anyway, everything should start with the family itself. People need to prevent the family from breakdown and a moral education should strive to bring out the good and «redirect» the evil. The most important thing for a parent to do is to

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<sup>16</sup> O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 231

love their child. Love breeds love and love lies in the basis of morality. If passing on moral values becomes an issue for all the families, we may get rid of a lot of antagonism and angst involved.

The world in which we live forces us to act in the certain ways. We become good people by constantly doing good actions. It influences our character and moral discernment on the 'right' or 'human' course of action to take. I suppose school, parents, the media should tell us more about heroes, leaders and simple people we can admire. Thus we should be formed into constantly judging good course of actions through the knowledge of right and wrong, of good and bad.

Finally, it's ridiculous to call honour, kindness and trust 'old-fashioned.' We all know friends, family and community members who have these virtues and more. Even if we fail sometimes, we try to put these values into practice ourselves. These values are basic foundations for a healthy society, whereas material possessions bring just short term satisfaction.

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## A questionnaire for girls

1. Do you agree that people have lower standards today?
2. Do you plan to have your own family in the future?
3. What is the most important thing in family relationship (love, respect, mutual understanding)?
4. Being married, could you except compliments from other men?
5. Could you forgive your husband`s breach of faith?
6. Do you think both the husband and the wife must provide family living?
7. Do you agree that both the husband and the wife must share household duties?
8. Do you think that the husband must bring up his children along with his wife?
9. Could you live your husband for love?
10. Could you leave your child for love?

The results of the questionnaire

№	Questions to girls	Yes	No	Do not know
1	Do you agree that people have lower moral standards today?	15	5	5
2	Do you plan to have your own family in the future?	25	-	-
3	Do you agree that love, respect and mutual understanding are the most important things in family relations?	25	-	-
4	Being married, could you except compliments from other men?	-	22	3
5	Could you forgive your husband`s breach of faith?	-	20	5
6	Do you agree that both the husband and the wife must share household duties?	25	-	-
7	Do you think that the husband must bring up his children along with his wife?	23	-	2
8	Could you leave your husband for love?	5	10	5
9	Could you leave your child for love?	-	25	-

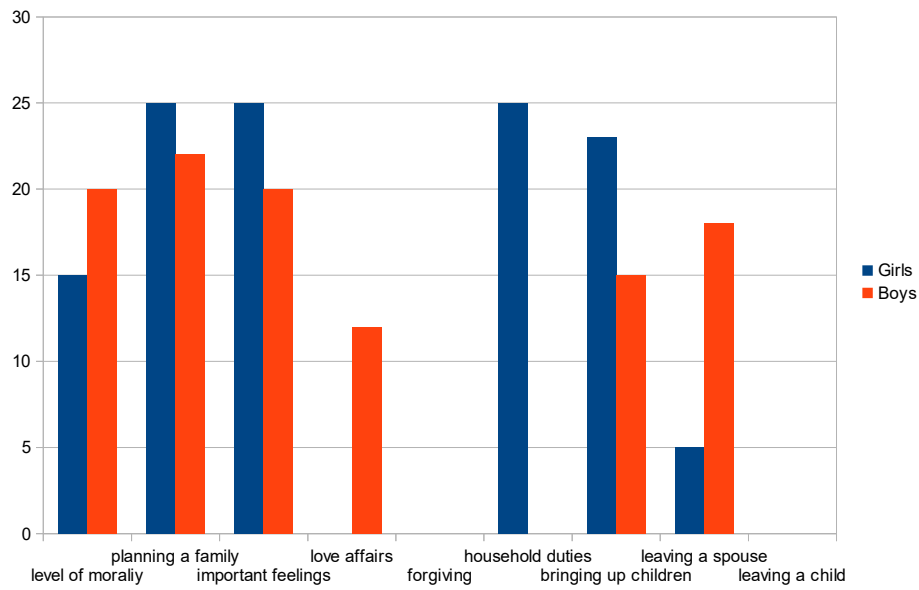
## A questionnaire for boys

1. Do you agree that people have lower standards today?
2. Do you plan to have your own family in the future?
3. What is the most important thing in family relationship (love, respect, mutual understanding)?
4. Being married, could you have an affair with another woman?
5. Could you forgive your wife's breach of faith?
6. Do you think that both the husband and the wife must provide family living?
7. Do you agree that both the husband and the wife must share household duties?
8. Do you think that the husband must bring up his children along with his wife?
9. Could you live your wife for love?
10. Could you live your child for love?

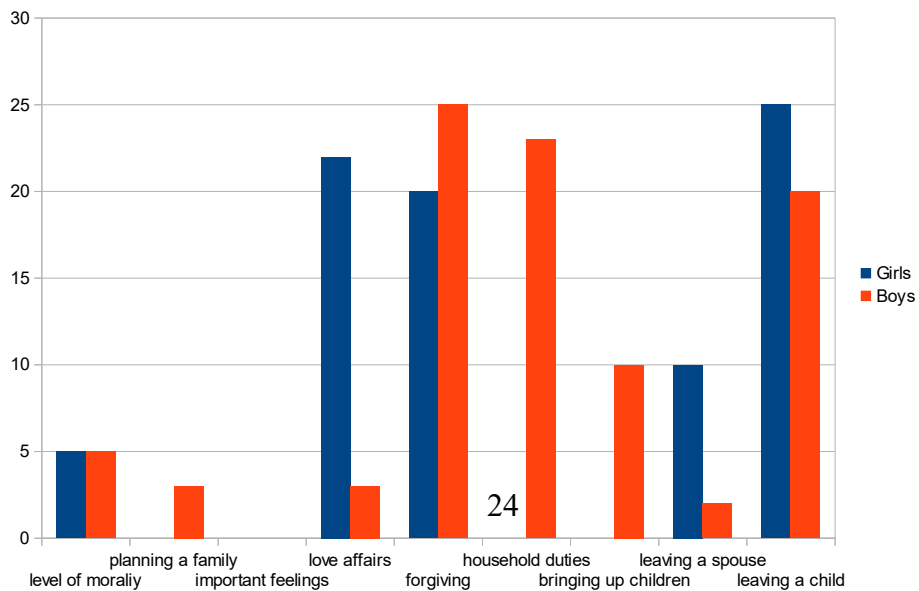
The results of the questionnaire

№	Questions to boys	Yes	No	Do not know
1	Do you agree that people have lower moral standards today?	20	5	-
2	Do you plan to have your own family in the future?	22	3	-
3	Do you agree that love, respect and mutual understanding are the most important things in family relations?	20	-	5
4	Being married, could you have an affair with another woman?	12	3	10
5	Could you forgive your wife's breach of faith?	-	25	-
6	Do you agree that both the husband and the wife must share household duties?	-	23	2
7	Do you think that the husband must bring up his children along with his wife?	15	10	-
8	Could you leave your wife for love?	18	2	5
9	Could you leave your child for love?	-	20	5

**Diagram 1**  
The survey: Yes-replies



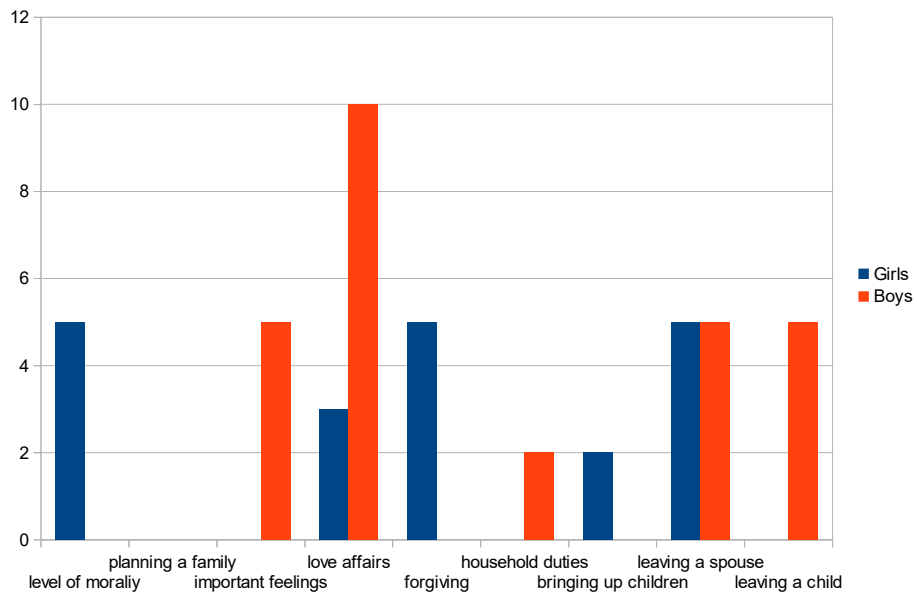
**Diagram 2**  
The survey: No-replies





**Diagram 3**

The survey: Do not know - replies



**Diagram 4**

Attitude to moral standards

