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**“Women’s Hypocrisy in Oscar Wilde's Comedies
The Importance of Being Earnest and Lady Windermere’s Fan”**

(Научная работа по английскому языку)

**Выполнила:
Ежкова Анастасия Дмитриевна
9б класс, МБОУ лицей 180**

**Проверила:
Соколова Лидия Фёдоровна
учитель английского языка**

МБОУ лицей №180

г. Нижний Новгород

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Introduction

This year people will celebrate the 160th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's birth. Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was an Irish playwright, poet and author of numerous short stories and one novel. Known for his biting wit, and a plenitude of aphorisms, he became one of the most successful playwrights of the late Victorian era in London, and one of the greatest celebrities of his day. Several of his plays continue to be widely performed, especially "*The Importance of Being Earnest*".

Chronicling a series of 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"¹. 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 shows 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"².

I find his works fascinating and worth deep studying as he is a real master of artistic expression. Last year I did some research on Wilde's first comedy "Lady

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

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

Windermere's Fan” and focused on women’s position in Victorian society and the main character’s moral values. In this paper I intend to concentrate on the women’s hypocrisy in Wilde's plays “Lady Windermere’s Fan” and “The Importance of Being Earnest”.

Victorian era was one of the most notable periods of English history for a number of great discoveries; starting from taking of the first photograph, over to presenting the Darwin’s ‘Theory of Evolution’, up to launching the wireless. This era signified economic advancement and prime for the British Empire. Certainly, Victorian society had many reasons to be proud. Yet, the Victorians were also greatly censured for being hypocrites.

The purpose of this paper is criticism of Victorian women’s hypocrisy. The focus of the study are two dramatical works by Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, in both of which Wilde mocks at hypocrisy of the upper class. Written in the 1890s and classified as social dramas and *comedies of manners*, the plays are concerned with a theme of marriage. Courtship of two single gentlemen who fall in love is a subject in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whereas morality of a married life is the questioned matter in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. **The main aim of the paper is to find and analyze the elements of women's behaviour in both Wilde's plays and to find out if they meet the standards of Victorian society or are hypocritical.**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

Firstly, to establish a theoretical background to the topic. To fulfill the aim of the paper, I intended to explore specificities, values, and social attitudes of the Victorian society in the late Victorian period.

Secondly, to gain a profound knowledge of Victorian values and virtues, vices, and the marriage institution.

Thirdly, to get a clear picture of the upper-class women's behaviour in both plays.

Fourthly, to investigate my classmates' conformity to social expectations.

Chapter 1. Specificities of the Victorian Society

1.1 Victorian Women Values and Virtues

Victorian values and standards were based on historically established religion, the patriarchal system, economic and social advances of the time, and the gender differences. The core subjects of Victorianism were morals and a family life. Values stressed by J. Gardiner were “morality and domesticity”³. Morality, a set of positive as well as negative public and individual values, was the crucial point of everyday discussion. Morality in the positive way was a state in one to admire. State that opened doors and kept one in the society if one remained moral.

While the upper class formed social standards, the Church established rules for public and private morality. The Church set strict rules upon the people of all classes to obey them. The rules included a set of morals, habits, and fashion forms. A very vast number of people were constantly endeavouring to reach those ideas, and “whatever may be the laws to which they have to conform, the influence of the social ideal is the main factor in governing their conduct and forming their ambitions”⁴

In other words, the standard set by the Victorian elite was more powerful than legal and clerical powers and seen by many people of the lower class as the ideal which they looked up to. Overall, it implies that earnestness had, however, a different meaning for the aristocracy than for other classes. While the middle class understood and followed respectability through the religious views, the upper class created its own honourableness based on wealth, entertainment, fashion, and etiquette.

Religion appealed to many people in providing charity at home and to be missionaries abroad. Charity and service to one’s fellow men were the standards of public activity. For the upper class, the attendance of the Anglican Church was

³Gardiner, John. *The Victorians: An Age in Retrospect*. London, 2002, p.3.

⁴Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. London, 1989, p.81.

regularly a matter of convention, if not belief. It suggests that the middle- and upper-class ladies were engaged in giving charity to less fortunate neighbours at Christmas time, but the richer were often beneficial rather due to conventional standards than from mercy.

Moral virtues of the Victorians were formed not only by religious views, but also by gender differences of the men being the superiors and the women being the inferiors. A respectable woman should meet certain standards. A virtuous woman meant that she was sexually pure, therefore, her qualities would comprise of chastity, innocence, purity, modesty, timidity, decency. Apart from these, there were others such as accomplishments, delicacy, strong emotions, forgivingness and willingness to accept her errant man, truthfulness, good manners and thoughts, sensibility, consideration, and overall moral superiority over men.

Domesticity was the focus of moral stability and the core of Christian religion. Family life was in the centre of the Victorian's moral world including the everyday private prayer, meditation, diary-keeping, and a Bible study as well as socialising with friends, relatives, and the respectables.

To sum up, life of upper-class Victorian women were supposed to follow certain rules due to religious and public principles that were established in high society.

2.2 Victorian Women Vices

If the positive values were stressed by the Victorians themselves, the negative aspects were commented by their successors. Many scholars accuse the Victorians of hypocrisy. In Perkin's view, "The English aristocracy was the focal point of envy, admiration, and gossip, representing for many people the lifestyle they most wished to imitate. For that reason, the class which should be claimed to set the hypocritical atmosphere among the Victorians is the upper class which, indulged in hard drinking, gambling, blood sports, and the keeping of mistresses."⁵ It can be assumed that the aristocracy was the source for insincere talk about moral

⁵Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. London, 1989, p. 312

and religious principles, whereas the middle class tended to come closer to the lifestyle of the elite, although, the style did not follow the rules established by religion.

Although, hypocritical behaviour is said to be associated with one particular class, it cannot be said about *vice*, immoral conduct which is for the act of hypocrisy the basic element. Among the negative male characteristics there were dishonesty, cowardice, meanness, brutality (comprising bullying, violence, drunkenness, and sexual overtures), heartlessness, weakness, foolishness, and emotionalism. Practically, the opposites of the earlier mentioned positive qualities can be also added to the list of vices, such as selfishness, insincerity and secrecy, falseness, flirting, infidelity. In case of females, “a disreputable woman was unchaste, indecent, shameless, perverse, clever and cunning, designing and unscrupulous”⁶ Women had to live fairly quietly, though hysteria and emotional display were tolerated as well as vacillation and indecisiveness. Similarly, the opposites of the mentioned moral virtues could be profligacy, immodesty, unwillingness to forgive and to support, untruthfulness, insensibility, inconsideration, aggressiveness, boldness, or disobedience. Theoretically, a hypocrite could have been anyone who possessed some of these vices and at the same time pretended to be respectable.

2.3 Victorian Marriage

Domesticity was the basic Victorian value, and marriage was regarded as the institution through which this value can be realized. Marriage held the reputation of the only proper social state for both men and women no matter the class.

Marriage was a highly preferred state by women, although by marrying a woman ceased to exist, for she lived by the act of marriage under husband's protection. “A man was answerable for his wife's actions: since she was presumed

⁶Frost, Ginger. S. *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, p. 55

to act under the command and control of her husband”⁷

There were several reasons for matrimony. From the public perspective of religion and government, the reasons for marriage were similar. The Christian view, set out in *The Book of Common Prayer*, stipulated matrimony for purposes intended by God: the procreation of children and their nurture in and love of God, for mutual joy of partners, their help, and comfort both in prosperity and adversity. A wife promised to obey her husband, while a husband declared to worship and endowed his wife with all his worldly goods. The contract was terminated by death of either partner, love and faithfulness were expected; sex outside marriage was considered a moral offence. Upper-class women had often low expectations of love or sexual fidelity in marriage which implies that they preferred those marriages where wealth was more important than love. From the individual perspective, the reasons for marriage depended on individuals as well as the class they belonged to. Firstly, the reason for marriage was affection and the family life. Women wanted affection and companionship, they wanted a home of their own, children, a husband with a legal obligation to maintain his family, a status in the community as a wife and mother.

Secondly, the reason for marriage was expansion of property and, thus, enhancing the social status of a girl and her family. Strengthening of the social status was primarily important for the upper class. That was the reason why so much importance was given to organizing of the parties and balls. Thirdly, the reason for marriage was also freedom. It was greatly appreciated by women, for men were freed from their parents' ties early before their marriage. By marrying women reached independence from their parents, could maintain their own domestic life, and make separate friends. Most freedom was again granted to the upper-class ladies, since the financial provisions obtained through marriage secured a fairly trouble-free life for them. Therefore, they could travel and visit relatives and friends as they liked, at the times of conflict with their husbands they

⁷Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. London, 1989, p.19

could leave them or even pay for divorce. As mothers, they were spared of rearing their children, since it was the servants' duty. Therefore, as Perkin states: "Upper-class Englishwomen in the nineteenth century rarely expressed any guilt or sense of personal deprivation about leaving their children in the care of nurses, nannies and governesses; nor were they criticised for finding mother-substitutes and sharing childcare."⁸

The common practice in the Victorian society was that marriages were arranged. Prior a marriage act the choice of a partner was on shoulders of the parents and their control was split by gender. Mothers were in charge of evaluating the prospective suitors, encouraging the proper ones, and discouraging the unsuitable ones, as well as planning the social occasions and weddings. Fathers had different responsibilities. They were responsible for their girl's fortune, giving their approval or disapproval for engagement, and stepping in when troubles occurred. Opinions of relatives (cousins, aunts, uncles, guardians, and in-laws) were also expected. If a marriage was discussed, class, wealth, and social status were taken into considerations, as well as a moral profile. Women usually married within their class. Cross-class marriages were not common, because women wanted to keep the standard they were used to, or even better one, for obvious reasons of comfort and social freedom. Wealth and social status of suitors were enormously important for aristocratic parents, as mentioned above. "Portions of £10,000 to £30,000" were normal in the high circles. Moral profile and age were also the issues for a discussion, if matrimony was considered. Respectability, moral qualities or age of the future partners may have been crucial for the middle-class families, but they were not so forceful to persuade the upper-class parents to consider the applicant, as in case of wealth and status. Both parties, but especially women, had to pass character tests to be considered marriageable. They had to be chaste; whereas a man, to pass the test, had to be a "good provider". Once a man suited the parents' requirements, the engagement could be announced in the local

⁸Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. London, 1989, p.97

newspapers and the marriage act could take place soon after that.

2.3.1 Women Hypocrisy in Marriage

Strong sense of morality and domesticity was weakened by immoral behaviour of marriage partners. One source for hypocrisy in marriage can be found in the social norm of dissimulation and deceit imposed on Victorian women. From the very young age, women were encouraged to hide their feelings, bodily functions (for instance, pregnancy), and to cover their bodies. Perkin explains that women were educated in dissimulation from the youth when their parents' repressive discipline aimed at keeping girls from seduction. The parental control over their behaviour and correspondence led to development of private codes of communication among the girls. They "had to get their own way by stealth" or otherwise, if married, by "nagging". Deceit, which is very closely connected with hiding, was practised by a married woman within her home, whether she needed to be informed about her husband's financial situation or avoid unwanted sex, or in social sphere, whether she wanted to pay a compliment to another lady or find the right partner for her daughter. A few men were also deceitful, however, mainly women were recommended by advice manuals to exercise duplicity. If deceitfulness was taught and advised in female education, it can be assumed that deceit, which gave rise to hypocrisy, did not have effect only on women, but also on men and consequently, affected the whole Victorian society.

Although, the English royal couple set a good example of respectability and fidelity in marriage, still, the morals of many upper-class Victorians were loose: "The higher classes - especially the aristocracy are so frivolous, pleasure-seeking, heartless selfish, immoral and gambling that it makes one think of the days before the French Revolution. The young men are so ignorant, luxurious and self-indulgent - and the young women so fast, frivolous and imprudent that the danger is really very great"⁹ Many upper-class women had close relationship with men

⁹Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. London, 1989, p.92

because many of them were royal mistresses and had to spend much time at the court and there was lack of attention women received from their husbands.

Chapter 2. Criticism of Women Hypocrisy in Oscar Wilde's Dramas

This part concentrates on the analysis of both Wilde's dramas and answers the question which elements of the Victorian society were criticized and considered hypocritical. Each drama is given a focus in a separate chapter, where examples of hypocritical behaviour of the aristocracy are presented. To start with the analysis, the meaning of *hypocrisy* must be defined and explained. Based on a dictionary description the *act of hypocrisy* is "a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, or some desirable or publicly approved attitude, that one does not really possess." A *hypocrite* is "someone who pretends to have certain beliefs or opinions that they do not really have". The crucial thing to know is that the act of hypocrisy is not related to things and values but human beings. In fact, hypocrisy originates in human behaviour. Therefore, the analysis is aimed at behaviour of the characters.

The basic sign of hypocrisy can be found in *moralism*. The common knowledge usually finds a negative connotation and sees a *moralist* as someone who tends to say to the others what is right and what is wrong in terms of morality. The dictionary meaning distinguishes a positive meaning, i.e. a person who practices morality, and the negative meaning, i.e. someone who is concerned with morals of the others and imposes censorship on their ethical conduct. The ongoing discussion will disclose what faces of hypocrisy were found in the Victorian upper-class society.

2.1 Women Hypocrisy in *Lady Windermere's Fan*

2.1.1 Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne and Goodness

Lady Margaret Windermere is a young upper-class lady who has been married to Lord Arthur Windermere for two years. They have a six-month-old baby-boy. When Margaret was a little child, her mother abandoned her and Margaret's aunt brought her up by Puritan rules of strong moral consciousness.

Margaret claims to be a Puritan herself and she is sure the world does not know what is “right and what is wrong”, suggesting that the morals of the Victorian age are led astray. She considers *love* as the ideal in life. When Lord Darlington, a friend of hers, tests her morality, Lady Windermere acts like a moralist. She thinks women and men who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven. Margaret asserts that if any woman or man trespasses against moral rules, their conduct should never be apologized or perhaps they should be punished for it. This young lady seems to be, as Lord Darlington called her, “a good woman” who has “purity and innocence”¹⁰ The fact is that Margaret is known in the high circles as a well-reputed lady.

Mrs. Erlynne, the mother of Lady Margaret Windermere, stands in the opposition to Margaret’s reputation. She divorced her husband, leaving him to take care for little Margaret. A divorced woman and a social outcast who was once banished from the Society she wishes now to return and a good reputation of her mature daughter should help her. Identity of Mrs. Erlynne is never revealed to Margaret.

Soon, Margaret is forced to deal with amorality of her husband who is rumoured for infidelity and financial support for a disrespectful woman. Since unfaithfulness was a moral offence casting a shade on the married couple, Margaret is keen on finding some proof in her husband’s bank book. She hesitates for a moment to look inside but excuses her doing on the grounds that she is Arthur’s wife and has the right to do so. Inside the bank book she sees that her husband pays money to Mrs. Erlynne, a stranger to Margaret. At the same moment, however, Arthur finds her reading his private bank book and accuses her of spying which she refuses to admit. Instead, she counterattacks which may be regarded as a rejection to confess her guilt. Apart from that, to claim that as a wife she has the right to look into husband’s bank book was also false. Such an excuse was impossible even for the upper-class ladies, for the fact that legally, wives had

¹⁰ O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., “Manager” 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 160

almost no rights at all in the Victorian times.

Arthur assures Margaret that he loves her, but at the same time, he seems to be obsessed with Mrs. Erlynne and asks his wife to invite Mrs. Erlynne for her birthday party. The reason is that the lady wishes to be received back into the Society and Margaret's good reputation could speed up the action. Margaret strictly refuses to do so saying: "No! If a woman really repents, she never wishes to return to the society that has made or seen her ruin."¹¹ Margaret talks foolishly and recklessly. She is jealous of Mrs. Erlynne for Arthur pays attention to her and pays her bills. As a consequence, Margaret warns Arthur that if Mrs. Erlynne comes to her party she would insult her in front of the most prominent people of the Society. She is so foolish as to expose the couple to a public scandal. Arthur Bingham Walkley, a drama critic, describes the character of Lady Windermere as someone who trusts in equality of fidelity for both married partners. Still, once her confidence in her husband is ruined, she acts on the base of vengeance. To be a "good woman", as she is presented by Arthur, the public and herself, she would be considerate and sensible. Unfortunately, she does not stand to her reputation. She is inconsiderate, insensible and unforgiving.

As for the morals, Margaret's conduct almost levels with that of Mrs. Erlynne's. Mrs. Erlynne appears from the beginning of the play as the "woman with the past"; degraded by a divorce and abandonment of her child. Moreover, further negatives are to be added to her characteristics. Firstly, her divorce suggests that she was not the virtuous Victorian lady, a meek and passive woman, but decisive and perhaps reluctant to support her family. Female support to a husband or children was the main duty required by the society and unwillingness of Mrs. Erlynne also suggests disrespect for her husband, lack of mother's love, and responsibility towards her little baby. Secondly, Mrs. Erlynne uses lies and deceit on many occasions: she pretends to be married to be easily received into the Society, or pays false compliments to please the aristocratic ladies. Thirdly, she

¹¹ O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 206

deliberately attempts to make her wooer jealous and Margaret's husband guilty of inattentiveness. Mrs. Erlynne, in comparison to Lady Windermere, is portrayed as a vile woman and her behaviour truly reflects the description.

Eventually, Mrs. Erlynne appears at Margaret's party, looking dignified which seems to prevent Margaret from insulting her. Appalled, she retreats from the public eyes outside the house, accompanied by Lord Darlington, a man who is in love with Margaret. Lord Darlington discredits Lord Windermere, in order to persuade Margaret to leave her husband and marry him instead. Although, Mrs. Erlynne behaves most distinctly, several ladies are enthralled by her manners and pay their compliments to the hostess, Margaret feels ashamed. Persuaded by Lord Darlington, she writes a letter to Arthur and leaves their house to retreat to the Darlington's residence. She thinks she is foolish not to accept Darlington's hand, but on the contrary, to stay with her husband and forgive him was, for a wife regarded as a socially-acceptable moral conduct.

In the meantime, Margaret is waiting in Lord Darlington's house. Suddenly, Mrs. Erlynne enters his room and urges Margaret to return to her loving husband who does not know either about the letter, nor about his wife's elopement. At first, Margaret does not stop accusing her and Arthur of treachery and stresses that she would take vengeance on Arthur, and to give him a reason for a scandal. She is as imprudent and simple as to openly run into a public disgrace. Then, discovering that Mrs. Erlynne read the letter addressed to Arthur, but burnt it, she carries on despising her presumptuous conduct, "You took good care to burn the letter before I had examined it. I cannot trust you. You, whose whole life is a lie, could you speak the truth about anything? Lord Windermere does not understand what love is. He understands it as little as you do - a woman whom it is an infamy to meet, a degradation to know, a vile woman, a woman who comes between husband and wife!"¹² All such accusations confirm that Margaret is a foolish upper-class lady who places greater importance on the unconfirmed news rather than trusting her

¹² O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 210

affectionate husband. The cited text suggests that she is influenced by hypocrisy of the Victorian upper-class society. The striking point in the cited text is when Margaret says to Mrs. Erlynne that she cannot trust her because her whole life is a lie. It was mentioned earlier that Lady Windermere believes in love (she married Arthur for love). Now, it is clear that she blames both Mrs. Erlynne and Arthur for not comprehending what love is, but at the same time, the escape from her husband and their child to arms of Lord Darlington means exactly what she despises at them, lack of love-understanding, and thus her proclaimed love is false and her attitude can be regarded as hypocritical.

Mrs. Erlynne, though she is disadvantaged by the disreputability and accused by her own daughter, does not stop persuading Margaret to return to Arthur. She even begs her not to spoil their admirable marriage and let her child suffer, as was the case of hers. It was the unexpected appearance of several gentlemen coming to Lord Darlington's rooms that almost led to a public disgrace of Margaret, but which was prevented by Mrs. Erlynne from happening. It is in the moment when she appears in front of the men, while Margaret escapes from the Darlington's room unnoticed. At the first time, Mrs. Erlynne expresses her mother's love through devotion, unselfishness, and sacrifice which Margaret eventually deeply appreciates and calls Mrs. Erlynne "a good woman".

To sum up this *Play About a Good Woman*, a question can be asked who of the characters the *good woman* really is? Lady Margaret Windermere holds a reputation of a Puritan and "a good woman", not only by her husband but also within the aristocratic circles. Margaret may have all the qualities of a virtuous woman, but once she is exposed to gossips of the upper-class society which have an impact on her life, her character reveals many vices, and she also becomes one of the hypocrites of her class. Her seemingly good-natured character is violated by foolishness, jealousy, inconsideration or insensibility. In many ways her character is similar to Lady Bracknell's character from the first play. On the one hand, she moralizes about observing strict rules for what is right and what is wrong, but on

the other hand she is unscrupulous in adhering to them herself. What is more, she is reckless to offend those who tell her the truth, such as her husband, or dares insult people who try to help her, such as her mother Mrs. Erlynne. While Margaret is presented as a good woman from the beginning, Mrs. Erlynne is characterized as a disreputable woman whose reputation suffered due to her divorce and abandoning her daughter after the birth. Although, she purposely misuses Margaret's good reputation in order to be accepted back into the Society, she saves her from the same fault she had done herself in her youth and spares her and Arthur from the same misery she underwent herself. By this action she proved her motherly instincts and care which demonstrates that, in Margaret's words, she is "a good woman". Eventually, Margaret, the good woman, becomes the bad one and Mrs. Erlynne, the vile woman, happens to be the good one.

2.1.2 The Duchess of Berwick and Snobbism

The Duchess of Berwick is a well-off upper-class lady who lives with her husband Duke of Berwick and their young daughter Agatha in London. The Duchess is one of the typically aristocratic women who are in favour of gossips and preying on scandals, therefore, she meets Lady Windermere on the occasion of informing her about rumours being heard in the high circles of her untrue husband. In conversation about their husbands the Duchess tries to support Margaret in handling the matter wisely and confesses that she had to pretend to be ill on several occasions, in order to keep her husband out of town and save him from infidelity. Lady Windermere believes that not deceit but love prevents a man from being unfaithful:

Lady Windermere: Windermere and I married for love.

Duchess of Berwick: Yes, we begin like that. It was only Berwick's brutal and incessant threats of suicide that made me accept him at all... In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty, respectable girl." ¹³

¹³ O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 168

The Duchess, as many other aristocratic women, is fond of gossiping and uncsciously initiates an action which almost led to a ruined marriage. Her own marriage is not successful, for the fact that because she considers her husband weak, emotional to commit a suicide and too coward to be lured by a woman. Therefore, as well as Lady Bracknell, not only she deceives him, but she also does not respect him.

Agatha, another submissive person who is under the Duchess's authority, is old enough to be married. Her mother is placed in the same position of finding a husband for her as Lady Bracknell was. The following passage reveals common practices of the upper-class mothers to find a valuable partner for Agatha. The Duchess is glad to hear that a wealthy and well-known gentleman is invited for a ball given by Lady Windermere. The Duchess thanks her for inviting Mr. Hopper, a rich young Australian, who is in the centre of attention in the social circles at present. The words pronounced by the Duchess about Mr. Hopper express that she does not take interest in his personal qualities; she finds him only an interesting man. The comment about Mr. Hopper's father's business that is successful but morally rotten indicates that the Duchess does not seem to pay much attention to it. It implies that she gives preference to both profit and popularity before love and one's character. What is more, counter to morality she is able to use subtle tricks to match Mr. Hopper with her daughter so that the courting is successful:

"Just let me see your card. (Scratches out two names) No nice girl should ever waltz with such particularly younger sons! It looks so fast! The last two dances you might pass on the terrace with Mr. Hopper."¹⁴

Duchess of Berwick feels that Mr. Hopper, a son of a successful businessman, is the perfect match for her daughter Agatha. At the party, she quickly refuses to allow her daughter to dance with two young gentlemen, suggesting that her daughter's reputation might suffer. But then she allows her to dance with him the last two dances on a terrace, as if this conduct did not look "so fast". Later, she is

¹⁴ O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p.179

so daring as to scold Mr. Hopper for dancing with her daughter on the terrace, although she agreed on doing so with her child some minutes ago. As a marriage broker, Duchess of Berwick acts in the same way as Lady Bracknell; she is too proud to allow her daughter dancing with someone who is below her class or who lacks wealth or positive attention.

When the signs of an upcoming engagement are clear from Mr. Hopper's proposal, the Duchess proudly announces to Lady Windermere: "I'm afraid it's the old, old story, dear. Love — well, not love at first sight, but love at the end of the season, which is so much more satisfactory."¹⁵ In other words, the Duchess is glad that her cunning strategies are repaid and her daughter's marriage would be financially secured which the Victorian hypocritical upper-class society found more attractive than love.

The Duchess of Berwick can be compared to Lady Bracknell. She also disrespects her husband, moralises about improper behaviour and demonstrates authority over her daughter. In search for her daughter's marriage partner she prefers his family's wealth and his reputation to affection towards Agatha or his character. She practices deception both inside her marriage and in the upper-class circles, as Lady Bracknell does. With respect to the snobbish way of the elite, her pretence for living faultless, but being foolish and amoral at the same time, she acts like a hypocrite.

To summarize, *Lady Windermere's Fan* introduces characters of Lady Windermere and the Duchess of Berwick and illustrates their hypocritical attitude. At the beginning, Lady Windermere is presented as a good woman, a virtuous lady. Later on, influenced by gossips, she eventually becomes foolish and unprincipled. As for the Duchess of Berwick, there is evidence throughout the play that she strongly believes in conventional principles of aristocracy and adheres to them. Also, she is foolish in the way to spread gossip, or else snobbish for being proud and insolent.

¹⁵ O. Wilde. Selected Prose. M., "Manager" 2000. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, p. 198

2.2 Hypocrisy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Lady Bracknell and Snobbism

Lady Bracknell is a well-off upper-class woman who lives with her husband Lord Bracknell and their young daughter Gwendolen in London. She is the one who plays solo and controls everyone. The close “victim” of her attention is her husband. Firstly, on the occasion of following her run-off daughter, she reveals she is deceitful towards Lord Bracknell:

“Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she (Gwendolen) is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture. I do not propose to undeceive him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong.”¹⁶

Secondly, Lord Bracknell is degraded by her in front of other guests at dinners. As one of the ‘*grandes dames*’ of high society, her social duty in family is to please her guests during parties which she undertakes with an utmost care and invites her smart nephew Algernon who is a guarantee of a pleasant conversation. However, when her nephew refuses to keep a company, she is appalled that no one of her visitors would dine at her table and her husband would have to dine upstairs. It implies that she is insensible and inconsiderate and does not respect her husband. In the first case, she dares deceiving her husband and openly declares she would not tell him the truth. In the second case, she would rather let him eat on his own than to stand his company.

Lady Bracknell asserts her control in the family also over her daughter. Gwendolen is old enough to be engaged and become a wife. When she informs her mother about being engaged to Jack Worthing, Lady Bracknell’s authority sets her daughter right:

“Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to

¹⁶ O Wilde. M., “Manager” 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 48

some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself.”¹⁷ Lady Bracknell’s severe comments are clear. Whether Gwendolen is engaged and to whom she would learn from parents. Her mother’s concept of marriage is based on rules led by the high class and, therefore, she cannot allow her daughter to choose as she wishes. No matter that Gwendolen is in love with Jack which she openly proves by her consent to their engagement, her mother is certain that a girl should not even meet her partner before marrying him let alone to decide herself. Authority of Lady Bracknell, as an upper-class mother, concentrates on conventional values of her class, wealth, character and age, to interview each “applicant”, and reason out her decision. Although, Mr. Worthing is not on her list of the potential suitors, Lady Bracknell is willing to interview him. For Jack, the whole dialog is unpleasant. He is warned from the beginning that his engagement with Gwendolen depends on the answers he would produce to her mother. Then, he is exposed to questions on his income and whether he has a town house. All seems to go well, until the Lady learns that Jack was found in a handbag when he was a little child:

“Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life. As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.”¹⁸

For the upper class the recognized position in society was the most important criterion to maintain respectability. In this case, once the Lady is informed that Jack’s origin is unknown, she arrogantly refuses him as a potential husband for

¹⁷ O Wilde. M., “Manager” 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 15

¹⁸ O Wilde. M., “Manager” 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 17

Gwendolen and he is promptly dismissed. Clearly, Jack's intention is to marry Gwendolen for love and he does not see any obstacles in being her husband, particularly if Gwendolen loves him as well. Despite this, Lady Bracknell disagrees, for she values social status and wealth more than affection for a partner or a person's character. Her foolishness and pride is more evident. As stated earlier, it is certainly for the reason that marriage for the well-off families meant accumulating property and strengthening their social standing.

Lady Bracknell shows her pretentious nature through her arrogance. She ignores anyone who does not fit to her posh taste and she does not go far to scold. When noticing her nephew Algernon holding Cecily's hand, she turns to Jack and requests to know who Cecily is. Lady Bracknell is appalled by their conduct and she makes it clear that such mores are improper. Those two are not even engaged and holding hands between two unmarried individuals was highly inappropriate and seen as a scandalous public flirtation. On the one hand, she moralises about proper manners, on the other hand, she deliberately stirs the troubles. Again, when she recalls Jack's story of his hidden social origin, she bluntly pronounces her biting remarks about Cecily's ancestry:

“Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? [...] Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus.”¹⁹

Her comment is aimed at mocking at Jack's unknown birth which demonstrates her arrogance and conceit. Yet, when she hears Jack's answer, she is more inquisitive for information about Cecily and, in a similar way to Jack's interview, Lady Bracknell is interested in her position in society; whether her family solicitors are seen in dinner parties or what dowry would she bring by marriage. When Jack mentions the sum, the Lady is astonished:

“A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the

¹⁹ O Wilde. M., “Manager” 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 49

present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces.”²⁰

It cannot be said if one asset is preferred by Lady Bracknell to another, for the fact that Jack, for example, could provide sufficient income but was rejected for being unable to document his origin. In particular, the tradesmen were not enormously sought-after by the upper class, but Cecily’s dowry would catapult her among the aristocracy. Lady Bracknell’s last remark on “living in an age of surfaces” suggests hypocrisy of the class to which she belongs herself. Otherwise, she would not pretend her deepest interest in Cecily’s profile in which she feigns searching for her accomplished personal qualities. After all, when she pronounces to see some marks of the distinguished society in Cecily’s face, it is obvious that Lady Bracknell is cunning and careful not to disclose her real interest. Obviously, Lady Bracknell’s sudden approval for the engagement is not based on Cecily’s pretty face, but the money she would receive through marriage. No other reason is possible. Her nephew Algernon is in debts and by marrying a woman with substantial wealth he would not only be spared from bankruptcy and certain scandalous reputation, but also it would secure a trouble-free life for him in future. Saying that she does not approve of mercenary marriages Lady Bracknell contradicts herself because she approves of Cecily and Algernon's marriage.

Lady Bracknell’s authoritarian view on customs abuses all people in and out of her family, and she does not go far for a biting remark. She is snobbish: arrogant, proud, and conceited. In her marriage, she is insensible and disrespectful of her husband. If marriage of her daughter is the point, the family ancestry and inheritance is more important to her than love of young people. She does not hesitate to profit from lying and deceit both inside her marriage and in public circles. In spite of moralizing and pretence for being faultless, her snobbish conduct uncovers a perfect hypocrisy.

Lady Bracknell is the symbol representing the English aristocracy which submitted

²⁰ O Wilde. M., “Manager” 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 50

social norms to the rest of the English society and rigidly kept to respectability and conventions of her class. None the less, the concept of its honourability is far from the standard notion of religious respectability: morality, hard work, or thrift. For the aristocracy, respectability is seen through material values, income, or social status. The ideal person dines at dinners and parties with other “respectable” people talking about stylishness. The ideal way of life is idleness filled with gossips about the “disrespectable”. Ironically, as the “elite” of the country, the upper class tends to be snobbish and does not follow the standard notion of respectability which indicates a profound hypocrisy.

To summarize, *The Importance of Being Earnest* presents the characters of John Worthing, Algernon Moncrieff, and Lady Bracknell who act hypocritically. John Worthing pretends to be a respectable magistrate in the country, while he keeps travelling to London for pleasures covering his visits for help to his unfortunate brother. He leads a double life which was in conflict with the proper Victorian morals. Algernon Moncrieff’s life is double likewise, though, in his case he invents a poor friend Bunbury to whom he refers anytime he wishes to escape social occasions with his relatives. Lady Bracknell is, on the contrary, an example of a woman whose hypocritical conduct stands for snobbism of the British elite. Andrew Sander judges the author’s intention of mocking at morality by his comment that: “Wilde triumphed in capturing a fluid, intensely funny, mood of ‘irresponsibility’” in the play.

Chapter 3 Young people's conformity to social expectations

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 conform to social expectations in terms virtuous qualities today?

To find out the answer to this question I decided to carry out some research. I created a questionnaire which was offered to 25 boys and 25 girls. 10 statements include personal qualities of honesty, willingness to help, self-criticism, human rating.

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

The Importance of Being Earnest and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, comedies of manners written by Oscar Wilde in the 1890s, mock at *snobbery* of the aristocracy. The elite of the country - the upper class (aristocracy) - which should have been the representative of Victorian moral values, reduced the standard concept of respectability (based on morality, virtue of one's character, hard work or help to the ill and poor) to the concept of their own honourability achieved by social status and grandeur of wealth, fashion, property, or social events. Snobbism and foolishness were the greatly censured aristocratic 'deeds'.

In the *The Importance of Being Earnest* the criticised element found is *snobbism* of the aristocracy. Lady Bracknell, a wife of Lord Bracknell and a mother of their daughter Gwendolen, is an upper-class authoritarian woman. In her family, she disrespects her husband and asserts social rules towards her daughter. In public, she proclaims the conventions and traditions of Society and she judges how the others obey them. What she respects are values set by her class; values which extend her property and strengthen social status of her family. Therefore, when she interviews Jack, a possible husband for Gwendolen, all she cares about is his money, property, style, and a family (aristocratic) ancestry. If Jack cannot prove his origin, she arrogantly dismisses him. She cares little for his character and his affection. Lady Bracknell who usurps authority to regulate everyone but herself and who is, at the same time, foolish, proud, arrogant, and illustrating snobbery, she acts like a hypocrite.

Similar tendency of hypocrisy was found in the *Lady Windermere's Fan* where the criticism is aimed at the elements of *goodness* and *snobbism* of the upper

class.

The drama discusses the virtue of goodness and introduces two ladies who are connected with this term: Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. Lady Margaret Windermere is a young aristocratic lady and a wife of Lord Arthur Windermere with whom she has a little baby. From the beginning, her reputation of a “good woman” is presented by her husband, the upper-class society, and herself, for she moralizes about what is right and what is wrong. However, it is so until she is exposed to rumours about Arthur’s infidelity. She believes the gossips and becomes jealous, inconsiderate, and insensible. She is so prejudiced against Arthur’s supposed lover Mrs. Erlynne as to almost run into a scandal and ruin the marriage for her, her husband, and to cast a shame on their child. Overall, Margaret is not as good as she and everyone around her profess which confirms that she is a hypocrite.

Margaret’s reputation is rescued by Mrs. Erlynne who is pictured as a vile, disreputable woman, for she divorced her husband, abandoned her child, and was outcasted from the Society. She cannot be described as a virtuous woman because she uses lies and deceit to be received back into the high circles, or attempts to make people jealous and inattentive. Still, Mrs. Erlynne appears as a woman who is devoted, unselfish, and loving. She is able to sacrifice her life and reputation once again to spare her daughter Margaret the misery of being outcasted from the Society and ruining her marriage. For these deeds, as Margaret insists, she can be called a “good woman”.

The Duchess of Berwick is an upper-class lady who lives with Lord Berwick and their daughter Agatha in London. She finds her husband weak and emotional and for this reason, as Lady Bracknell does, she does not respect him. She openly admits to deceive him. Agatha is similarly submissive which is due to the authoritative conduct of her mother. Being a member of the high class, the Duchess maintains her strong social awareness in the same way as Lady Bracknell does. For Agatha, she agrees to accept only a well-reputed husband who comes from a

wealthy family. Her tricky cunning techniques are revealed during the marriage settlement and her pride is evident when she finds such a partner. She surely belongs among the upper-class ladies who assert to be faultless but at the same time act immorally and snobbishly, and therefore, hypocritically.

To conclude, both dramas by Oscar Wilde reflect the morality of the Victorian upper-class society in the late nineteenth-century England. From the presented discussion it is clear that both scenarios document several elements of the Victorian society which were criticised for their hypocritical nature.

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 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

1. I never feel dislike to anybody.
2. I sometimes like to gossip about my classmates.
3. In some cases I make up a reason to exonerate myself.
4. I can admit my mistakes easily.
5. Sometimes, instead of the forgiving, I can revenge on the person.
6. When asked about doing a favour I help the person easily.
7. I can respect another point of view.
8. There were cases when I envied other people's success.
9. I never hesitate to give a helping hand others.
10. I do not value people by their social status.

The results of the questionnaire

№	Questions to girls	Yes	No	Do not know
1	I never feel dislike to anybody.	15	5	5
2	I sometimes like to gossip about my classmates.	10	15	-
3	In some cases I make up a reason to exonerate myself.	15	10	-
4	I can admit my mistakes easily.	18	7	-
5	Sometimes, instead of the forgiving, I can revenge on the person.	11	8	6
6	When asked about doing a favour I help the person easily.	25	-	-
7	I can respect another point of view.	23	2	2
8	There were cases when I envied other people's success.	15	10	5
9	I never hesitate to give a helping hand others.	20	5	-
10	I do not value people by their social status.	25	-	-

The results of the questionnaire

№	Questions to boys	Yes	No	Do not know
1	I never feel dislike to anybody.	15	10	-
2	I sometimes like to gossip about my classmates.	5	20	-
3	In some cases I make up a reason to exonerate myself.	20	5	-
4	I can admit my mistakes easily.	12	13	-
5	Sometimes, instead of the forgiving, I can revenge on the person.	20	5	-
6	When asked about doing a favour I help the person easily.	20	-	5
7	I can respect another point of view.	15	10	-
8	There were cases when I envied other people's success.	18	2	5
9	I never hesitate to give a helping hand others.	25	-	-
10	I do not value people by their social status.	14	9	-

