

# A watering down of Wilde

An Ideal Husband, directed by Oliver Parker; adapted by Parker, from the play by Oscar Wilde

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“Science is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon eternal truths. Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. To morals belong the lower and less intellectual spheres.” ( *The Critic as Artist* )

Thematically, Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, written in 1893, involves an interplay between the high ground of universal truths and the low ground of finite social morality. We are told at the play's end that an “ideal husband” (or human being) “sounds like something in the next world.” In the meantime, we have to live in a world not of our own choosing, with all the compromises that implies. In this imperfect place, therefore, where does personal responsibility for transgression begin and end? The play explores the contradiction between human beings' striving for ideals and the virtual impossibility of attaining the latter in the “mire” of existing society. The inner heart of the work contains Wilde's incessant quest for a higher reality, and his observations as an aesthete along the way.

The “less intellectual” or outer sphere of the play suggests that ideal husbands may have to be criminal to achieve success, and ideal wives may have to accept that criminality. Obeying the dictates of absolute morality is out of the question when it comes to amassing wealth and status. The main protagonist, Sir Robert Chiltern, has won society's admiration and his wife's high esteem on the basis of riches gained through an immoral act. Does the ultimate establishment of an independent and honest political career justify accumulating wealth through such chicanery? Sir Robert feels no remorse for his deed, as he has employed society's own methods and weapons. He fears only exposure and public disgrace. Admonishing his wife for putting him on a pedestal, Chiltern says: “It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love.”

His good friend and the chief Wildean persona in the

play, Lord Arthur Goring, who is socially “idle” (but perhaps philosophically ideal), notes “that in practical life there is something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always.” The transcendental Goring tries to solve the ever present ethical dilemmas: “All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity.” There is a genuine appeal for tolerance and tenderness in this play.

Oliver Parker ( *Othello*, 1995 ) uses Wilde's title, the names of his characters and some of the plot elements for his new film. The resemblance to Wilde's creation ends there and adaptation to other forces and pressures begins. Wilde is nominally invoked but the soul of his work is revoked. Wilde describes drama as the most objective form of art and the purpose of the latter to be altering “the minds of men and the colour of things.” This is an ambitious goal and the original play is written with deep feeling about his characters' quandaries and the inevitable difficulties that arise. Because the film's script omits or fails to emphasize much of what was mind-altering, the feel of Parker's work is sharply different from that of the play. Lost is the undercurrent of critique and protest with which Wilde imbued every scene, an undercurrent that reaches a crescendo as the play's episodes unfold.

Parker's greatest failing is his inability to deal in any serious manner with the play's pivotal sequences. When Chiltern (Jeremy Northam in Parker's film) faces ruination at the hands of the blackmailing Mrs. Laura Chevely (Julianne Moore), he explains the reasons for his past indiscretions to Lord Goring (Rupert Everett). He further tells his friend that if he does not put aside his political principles, he will lose all, including his beloved, albeit puritanical, wife (Cate Blanchett). In the film, this scene is an incidental moment, which passes almost without notice. In the 1893 play, on the other hand, it is

crucial, encapsulating Wilde's thoughts and feelings; thoughts and feelings that in 1999 would not be farcical, but dangerous.

At one point Lord Goring declares, "Life is never fair, Robert. And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not." Sir Robert Chiltern responds, "Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. The God of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one must have wealth. ... I did not sell myself for money, I bought success at a great price. That is all."

And further on in the same scene, Chiltern observes, "[A]nd then he [Baron Arnheim, to whom Chiltern sold the government secret] told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one joy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it. ... Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything."

Can freedom be achieved any other way under present conditions? According to Wilde, the biggest advantage of socialism would be the eradication of "that sordid necessity of living for others." (*The Soul of Man Under Socialism*)

When Chiltern explains that he has tried to buy Mrs. Chevelly off and she has refused, Lord Goring remarks: "Then the marvellous gospel of gold breaks down sometimes. The rich can't do everything, after all." The entire scene is remarkable.

Parker seems determined to transform Wilde's play into a parlor farce. He has omitted a good deal of Wilde's language, but even when the original dialogue is retained, it is rendered limp. Thus, Mrs. Chevelly's observation, "Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike," is turned from a dig at the opportunism and hypocrisy of the rich into a palatable party joke.

Parker's removing or rendering harmless the sting of Wilde's social critique is not the result of some right-wing conspiracy. It may not even be entirely conscious on the filmmaker's part. Many genuine admirers of Wilde's work today simply find his radical social views silly, tedious, anachronistic. "An attack on wealth and the wealthy?" What possible meaning could such a thing have in these circles? The adapter may actually think he is doing Wilde a favor by excising passages or downplaying themes that have so obviously become outdated.

None of this is an excuse, however, for the flatness and blandness of so much of Parker's film, including its overall look. Few images are enduring and the filmmaker's additions—intrigues at a Wilde play complete with a fictional Wilde (which, if Lord Goring's character is properly understood, seems redundant), a courtroom scene and the conversion of Mrs. Chevelly (an antagonist to the end in the original work)—amount to not much more than gimmickry. All, it seems, to the effect of watering down the spirit and feeling of the play.

This works its way into the acting as well, most of which lacks subtlety and depth. Peter Vaughan's performance as Phipps, Lord Goring's butler, is particularly contrived, and irritatingly dead-pan. Parker seems to have directed Vaughan to play strictly for laughs. Wilde sets forth quite a specific interpretation of the butler's role in the stage directions for Act Three. "The distinction of Phipps is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is so incommunicable. He is the mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life, history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form." A social truth is being made here—the best servant is a dehumanized commodity. This obviously goes entirely over Parker's head, or he chooses to ignore it. (This remarkable phrase, "Of his intellectual or emotional life, history knows nothing," brings to mind the subservient, mute secretary played by Irm Hermann in R.W. Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*.)

Will or could the film at least spur the viewer on to further investigate the artist? If one were to be introduced to Wilde for the first time by Parker's film, there would be little reason to seek out his other writings. Everything here is too neatly packaged and made small, at a time when the world is in crying need of Wilde's subversiveness and vision.

Let Wilde have the last word: "He is the Philistine who upholds and aids the heavy, cumbrous, blind mechanical forces of Society, and who does not recognize the dynamic force when he meets it either in a man or a movement." (*De Profundis*)



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