

WILD[E]LY COMIC AND BITTERLY CRITICAL: FOUR DARK COMEDIES OF OSCAR WILDE

Rajeshwar Mittapalli
Professor of English
Kakatiya University
Warangal 506009 Telangana

Anita Ahmadi
Ph.D Research Scholar
Department of English
Warangal 506009 Telangana

Abstract

Oscar Wilde is one of the foremost English playwrights who merits comparison with such greats as Congreve and Sheridan. Because of his sexual preferences he was arrested and incarcerated for two years. After his release from jail he went to France and died there of the physical and psychological wounds he sustained during the prison term. His four famous plays -- *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* -- which are often described as comedies of manners, are actually dark comedies that sought to criticise the unfriendly social norms and moral codes of the Victorian Era. These norms and codes were highly detrimental to the interests of the vulnerable sections of society, especially the women. Wilde's plays also held up to ridicule the hypocrisy, corruption and unjust practices of the time. While on the one hand they certainly entertained the audiences with their verbal fireworks and witticisms, they exposed on the other hand the shortcomings, inadequacies and other objectionable aspects of the 19th century English society. This article treats Wilde's plays as dark comedies and endeavours to bring out the social criticism deftly worked into them.

Keywords: dark comedy, Victorian society, puritanical, decadence, aestheticism, moral codes

Oscar Wilde is among the foremost playwrights in English and is often ranked with Sheridan and Webster, if not Shakespeare. He has also been perhaps the most controversial of the English playwrights -- once greatly reviled but now eulogized for his signal contribution to the English drama. He suffered much because of the Victorian ideology that laid overemphasis on decorum and decency in public life, albeit hypocritical behaviour lacking in depth and conviction. Victorian society demonstrated a marked intolerance towards those who dared defy its injunctions. Wilde was among these free spirits who took issue with society and paid dearly for it.

The experience of the world around him, not to speak of his own often dark experiences, greatly disappointed Oscar Wilde. A gradual change of attitude and outlook took place in him and it reflected in his plays. Despite his professed Aestheticism and its end of the century offshoot, Decadence, he started veering towards dark comedy for it best suited his purpose of exposing the dark realities of the English society of his time. But his idea of dark comedy is not exactly the same as is commonly understood today. His dark comedy is perhaps best described as 'society dark comedy' since it seeks to probe the dark recesses of society and bring to light the reality lying beneath it.

In generic terms dark comedy or black comedy is a drama (and even a non-dramatic work) in which unpleasant and often disturbing subjects such as death, disease, or warfare, are treated with a sense of detachment and amusement, usually in a manner designed to shock people into thinking deeply about what they have seen or read. It employs black humour which seeks to make light of what is normally regarded as serious subject matter. Black humor is also derived from treating topics and events that are traditionally viewed as taboo in a humorous or satirical manner while maintaining their essential seriousness. It results in the audience experiencing laughter and discomfort alternately or sometimes even simultaneously.

Sometimes dark comedy might contain an element of irony, or even fatalism. In Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, which is by common consensus the earliest of English literary works qualifying as dark comedy, self-mutilation is projected in a comic light rather than treating it as a horrific event in the life of its protagonist, Tristram. Tristram, then just five years old, micturates through an open window since he does not readily find a chamber pot. Unexpectedly the sash comes down on his member and circumcises him which sets off a flurry of chaotic action and philosophic reflection on the part of his family.

The originator of the dark comedy (derived from the French *humour noir*) was the surrealist theoretician André Breton who in 1935 designated a sub-genre of comedy and satire that, while dealing with serious subject matter, provoked laughter and had cynicism and skepticism thrown in. The immediate reason for Breton to coin the term was the publication of his book *Anthology of Black Humor (Anthologie de l'humour noir)*. In this book he further traced the origin of black humour to Jonathan Swift, making a special mention of his works *Directions to Servants* (1731), *A Modest Proposal* (1729) and *A Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick* (1710), and included forty five other writers who in his opinion practised this genre of literature. Breton demonstrated how humour arises at the cost of both the victim and the victimiser since the victim's suffering is trivialized in volley of witticisms leading to a more sympathetic view of the victimiser.

In America Bruce Jay Friedman used this phrase in his book *Black Humor* to refer to a wide spectrum of writers since who his view had much in common. Among the earliest American writers who employed black humor were Nathanael West and Vladimir Nabokov and among the recent writers are Edward Albee, J.P. Donleavy, John Barth, Joseph Heller, Louis-

Ferdinand Celine, Thomas Pynchon and Bruce Jay Friedman himself. Friedman's anthology caused a sensation in America kindling interest in the genre of black humour. A number of writers have tried their hand at black humour in their novels, stories, plays and poems portraying profound or horrific events in a comic light.

Dark comedy has never lost its appeal to writers since its beginning. It has engaged the attention of both well established writers as well as new entrants. Among the well known works that answer the description of dark comedies we might mention Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Joe Orton's *Loot* (1965) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Cat's Cradle*. Among other, less prominent, works are: Augusten Burroughs' *Running with Scissors* (2002), Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke, Survivor, Rant, Haunted, Lullaby, Invisible Monsters, Fight Club* and *Diary*, David Wong's *John Dies at the End*, Lemony Snicket's *The Bad Beginning*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Terry Pratchett's *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter and Witch*, and Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job*, Lemony Snicket's *The Miserable Mill, The Wide Window* and *The Reptile Room*. The most recent literary critical work dealing with dark comedy *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, edited by Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene, goes into how popular and visual culture employed humour in a variety of ways to confront the attacks on the Twin Towers and its aftermath. It seeks to demonstrate that humour can be a viable avenue for deferring or obfuscating social issues, a means of challenging neoliberal or neoconservative rhetoric, and a way of forging alternative political ideologies.

With his first successful play *Lady Windermere's Fan* Oscar Wilde inaugurated his own brand of dark comedies on the London stage. This play was first staged at the St James's Theatre on 22nd February 1892 by George Alexander and it ran nonstop for nine months. The theme of the play -- social ostracism and the travails it entailed for women who challenged the moral codes of the time -- was found by the critics so unacceptable that they felt profoundly disturbed by it. Their views are succinctly stated by Leonard Cresswell Ingleby in his book *Oscar Wilde* published in 1907.

He [Wilde] had in one evening destroyed the comfortable conventions of the stage, hitherto so dear to the critic's heart. He had dared to break down the barriers of ancient prejudice, and attempt something new, something original. In a word, he had dared to be himself, the most heinous offence of all! They could not entirely ignore his undeniable talent. Public opinion was on his side. So they dragged inside issues to point their little moral, and adorn their little tale. (Ingleby 104)

Although on the surface the play seeks to tell the story of Lady and Lord Windermere it is actually focused on Lady Windermere's social outcaste, and long lost, mother Mrs Erlynne. When the play opens Lady and Lord Windermere have been happily married for two years and have also had a baby boy. Theirs has been a love marriage, implying that Lord Windermere did not care much for his wife's past, especially her mother who was believed to have died. Everything seems to be going well for them until the 'notorious' Mrs Erlynne, reportedly a divorcee, enters their life and begins to extract money from Lord Windermere by blackmailing and threatening that she would reveal herself to be his wife's mother. Should that happen the young lady would experience tremendous pain. Lord Windermere would certainly not like his wife to suffer on account of Mrs Erlynne. He therefore obliges her and keeps her supplied with

huge amounts of money with which she tries to work her way back into respectable society. However, Lady Windermere eventually learns from her friend, the Duchess of Berwick, about her husband's frequent visits to Mrs Erlynne and verifies the information by checking his bank book. Her immediate feeling is one of disbelief and anger. She confronts Lord Windermere with many questions but the encounter results in no resolution to the issue; rather it leads to his extending an invitation to Mrs Erlynne to the birthday ball that evening. Lady Windermere prepares to insult Mrs Erlynne but cannot gather herself to do so. The ball progresses peacefully enough, and in fact Mrs Erlynne earns universal appreciation, including from the Duchess of Berwick, for her charm and grace.

When Lady Windermere finds her husband dancing with Mrs Erlynne at the latter's instance so that Lord August will feel jealous, she allows the unscrupulous dandy, Lord Darlington, to make addresses of love.

Yes, I love you! You are more to me than anything in the whole world. What does your husband give you? Nothing. Whatever is in him he gives to this wretched woman, whom he has thrust into your society, into your home, to shame you before every one. I offer you my life—... My life—my whole life. Take it, and do with it what you will I love you—love you as I have never loved any living thing. From the moment I met you I loved you, loved you blindly, adoringly, madly! You did not know it then—you know it now! Leave this house to-night. (Wilde, *Fan* 28)

Earlier too he professed his love for her but she happened to wave him off asserting her Puritanical self. She now gives in and prepares to run away with him. She quickly writes a letter addressed to her husband and goes to meet Lord Darlington in his house.

Mrs Erlynne chances upon this letter and her motherly instinct is immediately activated. Twenty years earlier she made a similar mistake and has been paying a heavy price for it ever since. She has been alienated by society and relentlessly hounded by it. She has been either running away from society or aggressively attacking it but never living in peace with it. She has not been allowed to. At least she has the psychological strength to face society squarely but her delicate daughter has no such strength. She needs to be protected at any cost. Mrs Erlynne seizes the letter and rushes to the house of Lord Darlington and successfully persuades the young lady to return to her husband. She puts herself to ever greater social risk in the process since Lord Windermere, who comes to Lord Darlington's lodgings along with some other men after the party, discovers his wife's fan there and demands to be allowed to search the place. This obliges Mrs Erlynne to come out from her hiding place and explain that she has accidentally brought the fan along, when actually Lady Windermere left it behind.

Back home, Lady Windermere feels safe but she has learnt her lesson. She is a wise woman now, so wise that she tells her husband in response to his statement that evil has never entered her world,

Don't say that, Arthur. There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice. (Wilde, *Fan* 60)

As for Mrs Erlynne, she marries her admirer, the elderly Lord Augustus, and settles down to a well deserved peaceful life abroad. Her one mistake, of deserting her husband after having

been misled by an unscrupulous man, has earned her untold suffering and misery because, among other things, she is a woman. The Victorian society pounced on ‘fallen’ women like her and punished them with a vengeance while allowing the men concerned to go scot-free. *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, which is a regular comedy to all appearances, is in fact a dark comedy. It makes us ponder the deep and disturbing issues that beset Victorian women and robbed them of the chances of happiness in life.

Wilde’s next play *A Woman of No Importance* advances the theme of its predecessor in terms of portraying the intense social ostracism of a hapless woman, who was misled and deceived by an unscrupulous upper class English man. She has to shoulder the responsibility of bringing up the child that resulted from their union and bear the brunt of social estrangement while the man concerned lives a happy life, well accepted in high society. Wilde deals with the issue sensitively so as not to offend his audience or to attract penal provisions the way he did with his work *Salomé*. Michèle Mendelssohn thinks that by the time he came to write this play he “developed a socially acceptable, censor-proof language for socially unaccepted women” (Mendelssohn 165). He nevertheless exposes the hollowness and the dark under belly of the English society by means of the sad story of the deceived woman.

A Woman of No Importance seeks to tell the story of Rachel (Mrs Arbuthnot) who was made pregnant when she was a young girl by the cynical *roué* Lord George Illingworth and subsequently abandoned by him. She bears a son, Gerald, and lives mostly hiding from society under the assumed name of Mrs Arbuthnot. Gerald is now twenty and is employed as an underpaid clerk in a small Provincial Bank. He is deeply in love with the American Puritan, Hester Worsley. He has no knowledge of Lord Illingworth being his father. At the opening of the play therefore when Lord Illingworth offers him the position of his private secretary he literally jumps at the idea. But his mother is bitterly opposed to it because she does not like to lose him, who has been her only source of comfort, all these twenty long and difficult years since her abandonment. Blissfully unaware of the secret of his birth Gerald insists on his joining the new position in spite his mother’s desperate emotional appeal against it.

I am no different from other women except in the wrong done me and the wrong I did, and my very heavy punishments and great disgrace. And yet, to bear you I had to look on death. To nurture you I had to wrestle with it. Death fought with me for you.... Night and day all that long winter I tended you. No office is too mean, no care too lowly for the thing we women love -- and oh! how I loved *you*. Not Hannah, Samuel more. And you needed love, for you were weakly, and only love could have kept you alive. Only love can keep anyone alive. (Wilde, *Woman* 61)

Her efforts do not bear fruit. But Gerald’s discovery of Lord Illingworth debauchery when he attempts to molest his lady love Hester changes it all. He flies into uncontrollable rage and would have even killed the lord but for the timely revelation of the secret of his birth by his mother. Later, in the final Act, Mrs Arbuthnot declines to marry Lord Illingworth when suggested by Gerald and proposed by the lord himself. Marriage has lost all its sanctity and meaning for her by now. She has lived fearing and fighting society for too long to make a compromise with it now. Apart from all this she simply does not love Lord Illingworth for all the suffering he inflicted on her and for so many years at that. In a symbolic gesture of final rejection of him she strikes Lord Illingworth across the face with her glove and collapses into the sofa overcome by a spasm of sobbing.

Mrs Arbuthnot's stand is vindicated by Hester's ready acceptance of Gerald as her husband. Mrs Arbuthnot, however, has her misgivings: "But we are disgraced. We rank among the outcasts. Gerald is nameless. The sins of the parents should be visited on the children. It is God's law" (Wilde, *Woman* 64). Despite her Puritanical leanings Hester is now convinced that "God's law is only Love" (Wilde, *Woman* 64) and all other considerations are irrelevant. Having thus been convinced, Mrs Arbuthnot not only gives her permission for her son's marriage with her but also agrees to travel to America and live with the new couple in another symbolic gesture of rejecting the English society which has put her to untold suffering for the perceived violation of its unjust moral norms.

Wilde shocked the Victorian society into seriously considering the discrimination meted to unfortunate women with *A Woman of No Importance*. The play was an artistic slap he struck across the face of the English society in the true spirit of a dark comedy. Yet the Victorian society welcomed it because deep down it perhaps felt guilty for all the cruelties it perpetrated and desired to be so punished. Leonard Cresswell Ingleby thinks that the play met with great success because it is "essentially human, and the woman's interest—the keynote of the story—appeals to man and woman equally (Ingleby 128).

Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, the third of his great plays, is also his most dramatic play in that its action is fast paced and suspense is sustained till the very end. It seeks to tell the story of four important characters: Sir Robert Chiltern, an influential member of the British parliament; his wife Lady Chiltern, a rigid moralist and stickler to points of righteousness in public and private life; their family friend Lord Goring, a thirty something dandy; and the wily blackmailer Mrs Cheveley, former schoolmate of Lady Chiltern and former fiancée of Lord Goring. Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern live a happy and contented life in the posh Grosvenor Square area of London. Into this peaceful life enters Mrs Cheveley demanding Sir Robert to support the ruinous Argentine Canal Scheme by withdrawing a report that he is planning to lay before the House of Commons since she has heavily invested in the project. When he expresses his reluctance she threatens to make public an incriminating letter, containing a cabinet secret, he happened to write to the stock exchange speculator and her mentor Baron Arnheim in exchange for a large sum of money. Fearing for his reputation Sir Robert momentarily yields to Mrs Cheveley's pressure but is obliged to write to Mrs Cheveley withdrawing his promise by his wife on pain of separation.

LADY CHILTERN. I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their lives - men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame - oh! Don't tell me you are such as they are! Robert, is there in your life any secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once, that - ... That our lives may drift apart. (Wilde, *Husband* 44)

Mrs Cheveley knows only too well that Sir Robert cares for his marriage as much as he dreads disrepute. The letter in her possession, if made public, would both ruin his marriage and bring him to disrepute. She therefore lets Lady Chiltern know the truth about how her husband has made money through dishonest means. Lady Chiltern, as expected, openly denounces her husband and vows never to forgive him.

Sir Robert suddenly finds himself in a very unenviable situation, shunned by his wife and facing the prospect of his career being completely ruined. He therefore turns to his friend Lord Goring for advice and help. Lord Goring promises to do what he can to help Sir Robert. Luckily for him Lord Goring happens to come by a diamond snake-brooch left behind by Mrs Cheveley

the previous night at the Chilterns. When Mrs Chevely comes calling him to trade the letter with his consent to marry her, Lord Goring clasps the brooch around her arm and tells her,

I mean that you stole that ornament from my cousin, Mary Berkshire, to whom I gave it when she was married. Suspicion fell on a wretched servant, who was sent away in disgrace. I recognised it last night. I determined to say nothing about it till I had found the thief. I have found the thief now, and I have heard her own confession. (Wilde, *Husband* 110)

Lord Goring then threatens to get her arrested if she does not give him the letter which has been the source of much suffering for his friend. Mrs Cheveley is thus defeated and incapacitated for further harm.

In spite of the threat held out by Mrs Cheveley, Sir Robert denounces the Argentine Canal Scheme in the House of Commons and is greatly applauded by the members as well as the press. The Prime Minister is so impressed that he offers Sir Robert a berth in the Cabinet that Lord Goring's father Lord Caversham has vacated. In the meantime Lady Chiltern is persuaded by Lord Goring to understand the compulsions of her husband and make peace with him. She indeed forgives him.

LADY CHILTERN. A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring. And I will not spoil your life for you, nor see you spoil it as a sacrifice to me, a useless sacrifice! ... You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now. (Wilde, *Husband* 137)

An Ideal Husband holds up to ridicule the Victorian English society's obsession with appearances and the absurd pretence of maintaining honesty and decorum in public life. During the Victorian Era while, on the one hand, people like Baron Arnheim and Sir Robert resorted to financial fraud to make money and got away with it, and in the true fashion of a dark comedy people like Mrs Cheveley stooped down to blackmailing again for financial gain, on the other hand, innocent people like Lady Chiltern naively preached idealism and insisted on others being morally upright. The latter were willing to finally make compromises all the same!

The fourth and last of Wilde's great plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, incorporates some classical features of dark comedy not only in social terms but also in terms of episodes and situations. First produced at the St. James's in February 1895, it is focused on the lives of four young people -- Algernon Moncrieff (Algy for short), Jack Worthing, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. Forced by circumstances and obliged by the custom of projecting a respectable public facade Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing maintain double identities -- while Algernon claims to have a non-existent sick friend in the country, whom he calls Bunbury, and goes 'visiting' him for several days on the end whenever he wishes to find relief from the obligations of city life, Jack Worthing for his part claims to have a worthless and wicked younger brother, called Ernest, living in the city of London and goes 'visiting' him quite often and for several days at a time whenever he is tired of playing the responsible guardian to his ward Cecily. In town, he assumes the name of Ernest perhaps to further obscure his identity and professes love for Algernon's first cousin Gwendolen. Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing are friends and at the opening of the play Jack is at Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street, London, and the purpose of his visit is to propose to Gwendolen who is due to arrive there soon with her mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell. His proposal of marriage is eagerly accepted by

Gwendolen primarily because his name is Ernest as she adores that name, but is rejected by her mother because of his uncertain lineage. It so happens that Jack is a foundling -- discovered in a hand-bag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station by the kindly Mr Thomas Cardew, who adopted him and eventually made him guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Lady Bracknell dismisses Jack with these words.

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 that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? 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. (Wilde, *Ernest* 28)

The disappointed Jack returns home, and now that he has no further need for a putative younger brother called Ernest, he decides to 'kill' him. Accordingly, as soon as he is back at his Manor House at Woolton he proclaims to Cecily, her governess Miss Prism and the village priest Rev. Canon Chasuble that his brother has died of severe chill in Paris. He also expresses his willingness to be christened Ernest in the hope of winning Gwendolen's hand at some future date.

In the meantime, Algernon who has been fascinated by Jack's description of his ward Cecily and developed fondness for her, comes to the country estate ahead of Jack himself and claims to be his younger brother Ernest. Now Cecily too has very clear ideas about names. She has always wanted to marry someone named Ernest.

CECILY. You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest.... There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. (Wilde, *Ernest* 62)

From Jack's description of his brother Ernest *in absentia* she has already fallen in love with him and now that he has materialized right in front of her she is more than willing to accept his proposal of marriage.

Gwendolen too comes there in pursuit of her sweetheart Ernest-Jack and the two ladies discover soon enough that neither of the two young men is actually named Ernest. They feel cheated but are willing to accept their explanation for assuming false names and forgive them.

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. [Moving to CECILY.] Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

CECILY. I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity. (Wilde, *Ernest* 83)

However, there are some loose ends to be fixed before things can go any further. The arrival of Lady Bracknell in hot pursuit of her daughter resolves these issues. Her enquiries reveal that Jack is in fact the son of her sister Mrs Moncrieff, and therefore the elder brother of Algernon. When he was a baby Miss Prism, who was in charge of him then, happened to place

him in a hand-bag and deposit it in the cloak-room at Victoria Station keeping instead the manuscript of her three-volume novel in the baby's perambulator. It is also soon established that Jack was in fact named Ernest after his father General Ernest John. Everybody is thus happy with everybody else in the end. Lady Bracknell also gives her consent to Algernon's marriage with Cecily in view of her considerable wealth.

Soon after the first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* the anonymous reviewer of *Truth* wrote how undoubtedly it was amusing as play.

“...I wish at once to admit, fairly and frankly, that *The Importance of being Earnest* amused me very much. The author has told us that he himself regards it as ‘a delicate bubble of fancy’; but there is rather too much in it about babies being left in hand-bags at the cloakrooms of London termini for me to allow it is that. No, it is neither ‘delicate’ nor ‘bubbly’; but, I repeat, it is undoubtedly amusing, and that is a quality which, in *le monde où l’on s’ennuie* [the world where one bores oneself], is certain to meet with warm approval. Whether we should have heard as much as we have about it, had anybody else written it, is doubtful; but that only shows the importance of being -- Oscar. (Beckson 219)

It is amazing that the English society received the play so well in spite of its implied criticism of many of its dearly held practices and beliefs. Indeed the play satirizes the Victorian double standards, double identities and its obsession with style rather than substance. It is an eloquent commentary on how the Victorians projected themselves as being earnest but actually lived in a make believe world of false prestige, false images and false relationships. Thus, although, on the surface the play has all the trappings of a hilarious comedy, beneath the surface it is biting critical of the Victorian English society. It is also a most fulsome dark comedy complete with assumed names, double life, lost and found children, love *in absentia* and instantaneous love. These elements of the generic dark comedy supplement and sharpen the social criticism that has been deftly worked into the play.

Oscar Wilde's dark comedies thus subtly disprove the false claims of the Victorian English society. While *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* expose the cruel treatment meted out to the so called ‘fallen’ women, *An Ideal Husband* brings to light the widespread corruption eating into the very vitals of the English society and finally *The Importance of Being Earnest* subjects to bitter criticism the hypocrisy that characterized social discourse. Wilde had to choose the comic mode to expose the dark realities of the English society because it would have been impossible to find a sympathetic audience otherwise. He had in the final analysis succeeded in making his point, and making his mark as a literary artist well, by means of these four sociologically oriented dark comedies.

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