



LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

Written by: Oscar Wilde

Directed by: Bruce Cohen

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Show Synopsis:



*Lady Windermere's Fan, 1914,
Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne*

Lady Windermere's Fan, written in 1892 by Oscar Wilde, is a play surrounding the upper-class life of a Late Victorian household. Lord Windermere and his wife, Lady Windermere, seemingly live the traditional wealthy life of the time. However, throughout the duration of the play - secrets are revealed, trust is broken, and the well-kept-up facade of decorum and grace are slowly broken down as individuals' true identities and intentions come to the surface.

The World of the Play:



Lady Windermere's Fan takes place towards the end of the Victorian Era (around 1880-1890s) in London, England. The historical context of this play is vital when discussing it, as it intensely influences the characters and themes presented within.

The Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) saw a gargantuan change in Western society, with cities becoming larger day by day, more job



opportunities arose, and people flooded into urban areas - like London. To give an example of just how much London grew in the century, the population of London in 1800 was 1 million, and by the 1900s rolled around, the population was around 6.9 million people. That's an

estimated 5.9 million people coming to London in just 100 years. This rapid overpopulation had many of numerous effects on society. Despite more jobs and opportunities for individuals, the overpopulation and overcrowding created horrible conditions and greatly unstable economics. London



didn't have enough stability to support as many people as it had in its center, so hundreds of people were forced into small living areas, and there was a lack of food and basic necessities. These conditions, along with a lackage of a proper sewage system made London a breeding ground for illnesses, most notably Cholorea.

Despite the vileness of the living conditions of the lower class - which made up the great majority of the population in London - the rich only got richer, and had isolation from the areas in London in which the conditions were poor.

The wealthy at the time had the luxury of living the simple life, with simple topics of conversation, completely absent and unexposed to the realities of the world, whilst basking in their privilege. They would commonly attend social gatherings including; going to a theater or opera, playing cards in clubs, going to watch sporting events - boxing was gaining popularity at the time, and as shown in *Lady Windermere's Fan*: attending balls during the social season.

Oscar Wilde wanted to create a political satire, disguised as a charming comedy to point judgment at the shallow lives of the rich. Engulfed in shallow topics of conversation and the masks they all put up in an attempt to fit in with what upper-class, pretentious society deemed proper, disguising who people truly are.

About Oscar Wilde:

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was a dramatist and poet from Dublin, Ireland. He wrote a number of popular plays aside from *Lady Windermere's Fan*,



including:

The Importance of Being Ernest (1893)

The Ideal Husband (1895)

Salome (1891)

The Duchess of Padua (1883)

Vera; or, The Nihilists (1880)

However, while well known for his plays, one of his most famous works is the

novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Oscar Wilde became well known for the wit he presented in his writing and his epigrams. While not limited to this, Wilde was best known for his comedies. It was recorded that Wilde had said that he wrote comedies to “please himself” and this sentiment was backed up by Victorian painter, art analyst, and lecturer William Rothenstein who said that Wilde was “making legitimate use of the artifice which was, in fact, natural to him.”

Oscar Wilde was also a huge advocate of the Aestheticism movement in the Victorian age of art. The Aesthetic movement was the belief that art exists for art's sake and does not have to have a purpose for existing, or need to serve some greater purpose than just to simply be art - beautiful for itself.

Oscar Wilde famously put this belief to words in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; which reads:



In many of Oscar Wilde's works, there is a scandalous sin that is kept secret in which the play revolves. However, as fiction as his plays and stories may be, the inspiration for that came from his own experiences as a homosexual man during a time when it was not socially acceptable to be. As Wilde put into his essay *The Decay of Lying* (1889), he found himself recklessly pursuing his pleasures in numerous men, one of them being Lord Alfred Douglas. When they were found out, Oscar was put on trial in 1895 and found guilty.

However, in 2017, he - along with 50,000 other men, were pardoned posthumously under the Turning Law, which exists to honor the men who were unjustly imprisoned for these crimes that no longer exist.

Themes of the Play:

While at the surface, *Lady Windermere's Fan* may seem like a melodramatic play focusing on gossip, scandal, and affairs, and while that may be true - *Lady Windermere's Fan* is thematically rich, and a cleverly written and executed political commentary, exploring themes such as morality, deception of appearances, individualism, and the falsehood of the elite.



Lady Windermere's Fan was originally going to be titled "The Good Woman," a fitting title for a large theme of this show is morality. The idea is that morality is fluid and not black and white. *Lady Windermere* presents the idea in the beginning that she believes people are

one or the other; good or bad. However, as secrets slowly get revealed and her complicated relationship with Lady Erylne evolves, she comes to see that this is not always the case, and good and bad can coexist. Just because one's actions may not seem acceptable from an outsider's eye, the reality of a situation may not always be what it seems, and we cannot judge good or bad based on an external view of any person, which ties into another theme: deception of appearances. *Lady Windermere* seems adamant about the wickedness of Lady Erylne from

the start, expecting her to be entangled in an affair with her husband. However, at the end of the play, Lady Windermere exclaims that Mrs. Eryne is in fact a good woman, for she comes to see that Mrs. Eryne has a good heart and doesn't act out of malice.

Another large theme of this show is the falsehood of the elite and individualism. The entirety of Lady Windermere's Fan is based on interactions between characters. From early on you can see that a main topic of conversation seems to revolve around gossip and scandal,

nothing particularly deep or analytical.

Very shallow and artificial conversations

that contain the decorum and

politeness that was expected at the time,

especially of women. Women at the time

were seen as graceful, elegant, soft-spoken, and obedient. If you stray too far from "normalcy", and if you speak your mind, ignoring the decorum at the time, you could find yourself becoming outcasted from society. Hence why proper etiquette and manners were so important,

also explaining why topics of conversation are so shallow and meaningless. However, Lady Windermere finds herself at a crossroads in this conflict. Early on in the play when Lady Windermere discovers Mrs. Eryne's suspicious relationship with her husband, Lord Windermere tells her that she must invite Mrs. Eryne to her ball. However, her morality and upholding her principles compel her not to do so. So she



finds herself caught between the obligation to her husband to obey him, or the obligation to herself to maintain her moral code and her strict sense of right and wrong; “good and bad”.

Then we can look at the symbolism of the fan itself. A fan symbolizes delicacy and femininity, yet early on in the play, Lady



Windermere threatens to strike Mrs. Erylnne with it. A tool of grace soon turns to a tool of violence, symbolic of the duality of nature within Lady Windermere, but also within everyone.

This can also be seen with Lord Darlington as he seems charming and acts like a gentleman when out in society, but when he and Lady Windermere are in private, he seems to drop the act and suggest she run away with him, partaking in an affair. He lets the mask fall and reveals that he isn't truly interested in Lady Windermere as a friend but rather as a partner, letting his desires become forefront and get the best of him and his actions - who he truly is revealed.

It's the casual, clever writing like this that makes Lady Windermere's Fan timeless, and the subtleties didn't go unnoticed at the time of release either. This show has sparked conversations about the social elite and the roles of women in our society.



Lady Windermere's Fan, 1892

Cecil Graham, Lord Darlington, Lord Dumby, Lord Augustus, Lord Windermere

Oscar Wilde's Preface: From *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.

The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.

From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician.

From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.

All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.

When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it.

The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

Historical Examples:





La Mode Pratique



Study Guide Questions:

Despite Oscar Wilde being incredibly vocal during the Aestheticism movement, many of his plays (like *Lady Windermere*) have a political message engrained within them. In what ways was Wilde an aesthete? In what way was he political? Do these two contradict each other?

Why do you believe Oscar Wilde changed the name of the play from “*The Good Woman*” to “*Lady Windermere’s Fan*”? Does this change the way an audience member views this play?

After viewing the play, what do you think the different characters in this play represent? In what ways do each of them reflect the social elite at the time? How do they assist the narrative?

Do you think *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is still relevant today? Why or why not? Why do you believe *Lady Windermere’s Fan* has remained well known and respected 132 years later?

Who do you believe are the protagonists and antagonists of this show? Is *Lady Windermere* a protagonist, antagonist, or possibly anti-hero?

Further Readings:

<https://www.thehistoryoflondon.co.uk/in-brief-late-victorian-london/>
Late Victorian London - History of London

London in the 1890's - Karl Beckson (novel)

<https://www.wenglinskyreview.com/wenglinsky-review-a-journal-of-culture-politics/2020/6/13/the-importance-of-lady-windemeres-fan>
The Importance of Lady Windermere's Fan - Wenglinsky Review

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-the-aesthetic-movement?srsltid=AfmBOoptaAqOLyh0IQ5EaUoFn10g0gRa0GTj5HIH5b52j54DC6L3jVve>

An Introduction to the Aesthetic Movement - V&A

<https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Oscar-Wilde/>
The Life and Times of Oscar Wilde - Historic UK