

Private Desires and Public Decency: A Queer Theoretical Analysis of *An Ideal Husband*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand the hidden, untold secret behavior of the male characters in the drama *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde. An autobiographical touch on the character, Sir Robert Chiltern leads to the conception of queerness. The paper targets an in-depth analysis of Gender and Gender categories (LGBTQ) by using Queer theory, Performativity, Disidentification, and the Closet. The reader is drawn to the play from a queer perspective by its themes of secrecy and disidentification. The usage of irony creates a theatrical space where queerness subtly thrives beneath the surface. The paper also positions Wilde's play as a foundation for modern queer literature and drama. Ultimately, Wilde presents morality as a mask and identity as performance, queering both genre and gender in a society unwilling to name the truth aloud.

Keywords: Queer theory, Disidentification, Genre, and Morality.

Introduction

As human beings, we are greatly blessed by the Almighty. Everybody has unique characteristics as in ideas, opinions, decisions, and much more. As we are all experiencing different situations, we have an individual responsibility to be ourselves in society. The modern world has paved the way for society to understand what sexuality is. But our knowledge of Gender and Queer studies is still ill-identified. The play *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde is admirable for its satirical formation, witty conversations, and elegant portrayal of the themes of the Victorian Society. For a casual reader who has just started reading or developed an interest in reading may find this play Authentic and Traditional. It praises the sanctity of heterosexual marriage. A couple who are happily married, and another who is about to get married. However, beneath the polished veneer of moral dilemmas, lies a radical subtext that portrays the secret, shared feelings of the male characters.

The paper argues that *An Ideal Husband* operates as a queer text, not considering the author Wilde's own identity as a Gay man in society, but by the structure, themes, and the theoretical strategies of the play. As for the normal readers, the play only talks about comedy, romance, and a political issue. But in reality, the author has said some important context under the cover, since it was considered a potential crime and sin, the author wants the character to be inside the closet. It is a beautiful technique that the author employs in his work. Wilde is known for his usage of Dramatic irony in his works; he employs it to convey the context of heteronormativity. But in disguise, he hides homosexual realities in the play. This study uncovers how Wilde employs the character and dialogue through queer theoretical frameworks of Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, Judith Butler, and Jose Esteban Munoz. Applying the concept of Closet, Theory of performativity, and idea of disidentification to the characters Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern. It shall expose the performances of masculinity and femininity and emphasize secrecy, and all point towards queer sensibilities. Gender is always a social construct, whereas sex is natural, the way we are born. Society has various rules, regulations, and parameters for an individual to live. If someone moves a bit far away from the usual track shall be viewed with the greatest hatred and differently. People who have different sexual identities, like Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, etc, may not have a normal life. Their life is complicated and it is filled with emotions, hurts, and always hurdles.

The reading of *An Ideal Husband* contributes to the ongoing efforts in queer literary studies to recover and reevaluate the context, historically constrained by censorship, moralism, or normative interpretation.

Masculine construction of the character Sir Robert Chiltern:

The playwright has developed this character as a well-liked, occupied politician, and a man of words and integrity. In the initial stage, he was neither rich nor poor, but his fate through Baron Arnheim has changed his life entirely. He enjoys a happy married life and the wealth that he obtained. Though Sir Robert Chiltern seems to be an embodiment of heterosexual masculinity, a man of honor, a devoted husband, his behavior leads the readers to think about concealment, performativity, and internal crisis. A veiled representation of the suffocating structures of Victorian heteronormativity. The main conflict is with Sir Robert being the one who sold a Cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim in his youth, which could destroy both his political career and private marriage. This seems, on the surface, yet another morality tale of political corruption. But reimagined as a queered text, it reveals an anxiety of exposure and a fear of cultural approbation that localizes ant-locust sentiment in what the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously refers to as "the epistemology of the closet": systems of concealment, revelation, secrecy, and scandal fundamental to queerness under heteronormative regimes.

More than the crime, Sir Robert is effed-up by the loss of a meticulously designed persona that would clear any hurdles against compliance in a world where nothing grows but consensus and vanity. As was the case for so many queer people of the 19th century, his life is predicated on mercilessly hiding something that everyone would agree was absolutely damning. The letter that some have written fifteen or more years before, the one that contains his history secret of days and weeks that makes him feel older than God, this letter now comes to stand in for the closet itself, the nominally-notional realm whose unsealing puts all at peril of personal and social obliteration. The notion that Sir Robert has a hidden secret at the foundation of his upright reputation reflects the double lives many such as Wilde himself had to live during this time.

"sir robert chiltern. It would be quite useless.
lord goring. May I try?
sir robert chiltern. Yes; but nothing could make her alter her views.
lord goring. Well, at the worst it would simply be a psychological experiment.
sir robert chiltern. All such experiments are terribly dangerous.
lord goring. Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn't so, life wouldn't be worth living. . . . Well, I am bound to say that I think you should have told her years ago.
(Act II page no 33)".

However, despite the plot depending so heavily upon Sir Robert's marriage, there is another emotional centre to it without which things would be quite different: his friendship with Lord Goring. Sir Robert's crisis is not only mediated by Goring, who of course represents Wilde's dandy alter ego, but he also serves as his friend and support system. His interactions with her convey a warmth and poignancy that typically outstrips Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern's colder, more idealized dialogues.

Interpreting Sir Robert as a queer figure creates an opportunity to reflect on Wilde's own place within the narrative. While crafting *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde was navigating a dual existence, outwardly a husband and father, while secretly engaged in same-sex relationships that ultimately resulted in his notorious trials and incarceration.

Lord Goring as a Queer Figure: A feminine version.

One of the most interesting characters in the drama is Lord Goring, who describes himself as an idler, dandy, and aesthete. Lord Goring deserves a more in-depth and nuanced reading because he is typically dismissed as either Wilde's spokesperson or comedic relief, particularly when examined through the lens of queer theory.

Goring is a very queer person in addition to being a charming bachelor. He questions heteronormativity and ironically performs masculinity. In an era when homosexuality was prohibited and queer identities were either coded or silenced, he quietly mirrors Wilde's battles with desire, identity, and secrecy. Lord Goring is the quintessential dandy, a figure typically linked to disobedience, an appreciation of beauty, and a fluid gender identity. His obsession with fashion, his distaste for work, and his ironic detachment from traditional social norms set him apart from the Victorian man's ideal of diligence, gravity, and moral rectitude. Goring prioritizes enjoyment, witticism, and beauty over masculine dominance and control. This direct denial of conformity becomes a manifestation of queerness. Oscar Wilde's personal engagement with aesthetics and the politics of beauty has a profound impact on queer perspectives. Lord Goring, Wilde's most reflective character, prioritizes artistic appreciation over ethical considerations.

“lord goring. I sincerely hope not, father. However, I am delighted at what you tell me about Robert, thoroughly delighted. It shows he has got pluck. lord caversham. He has got more than pluck, sir, he has got genius.

lord goring. Ah! I prefer pluck. It is not so common, nowadays, as genius is. (78,79)”.

He says things like, “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance”, echoing Wilde's own aphorisms. His salon, filled with rare objects and fashionable décor, becomes a queer domestic space, a retreat from the Victorian home's strict heterosexual structure.

In contrast to Sir Robert Chiltern, whose existence is based on Victorian propriety and concealment, Goring lives openly in uncertainty. He rejects the pressures of marriage, avoids political aspirations, and prioritizes enjoyment over values. This artistic way of life challenges the standards of conventional domestic relations and proposes a distinct expression of male closeness, selfhood, and longing. His queerness is rooted in this different approach to living, a life characterized not by reproductive future but by aesthetic present.

Goring's fashionable character enabled Wilde to introduce queerness into the mainstream theater, disguised as humor and allure. Viewers found amusement in Goring's peculiarities, yet simultaneously, they were exposed to a type of queerness that was not sorrowful or evil, but clever, fashionable, and pivotal to the story. Goring's victorious part in the production of solving the conflict, entering marriage on his own terms, and upholding his aesthetic principles contrasts sharply with the more traditional and morally conflicted characters such as Sir Robert. Through his performance of dandyism, his rejection of Victorian masculinity, his emotional closeness with men, and his ironic distance from heteronormative institutions, Goring queers the very fabric of the society he inhabits. He does not declare his queerness because he cannot. But he lives it in gesture, in speech, in style.

Queer Theory Framework: Performativity, Disidentification, and the Closet

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: The Closet as Structure

Sedgwick's foundational work in queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet*, introduces the idea that sexuality is often coded rather than stated outright, especially in literature that emerges from repressive contexts. The binary of in/out of the closet becomes a metaphor for the entire structure of modern sexual understanding. In Wilde's play, public secrets, particularly Sir Robert's past misdeeds, mirror the personal secret of homosexuality that the author himself was forced to keep. The idea of a “double life” becomes central not only to character identity but also to narrative tension.

The most significant emotional connection for Lord Goring in the play is not with a female character but rather with Sir Robert Chiltern. The depth of their relationship, the strength of their loyalty to one another, and the regularity of their intimate and emotionally significant discussions suggest interpretations that extend beyond mere camaraderie.

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire, the continuum between male friendship and eroticism, applies well here. Their bond is intimate and foundational to the plot's emotional stakes. Goring transforms into Sir Robert's trusted advisor, ethical compass, and emotional anchor, roles typically associated with a romantic partner. Although the vocabulary stays veiled, the emotional intimacy and significance of this connection indicate a shift in narrative focus concerning sexuality. In a dramatic work that concludes with marriages between heterosexual couples, it can be argued that the relationship between Goring and Chiltern holds the greatest emotional depth and complexity.

Judith Butler: Gender as Performance

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* introduces gender performativity, the idea that gender is not innate but enacted through repeated behaviors and social expectations. Wilde's characters, particularly Lord Goring, can be seen as engaging in gender performance that mocks or exaggerates normative roles. Goring, with his dandyish attire, theatrical wit, and apparent disinterest in conventional masculinity, performs a queered masculinity that resists categorization. As Butler writes, “Gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler 25). Goring's performance destabilizes the expected link between manhood and moral authority.

Lord Goring represents the archetypal dandy, a character traditionally associated with defiance, artistry, and blurred gender identities. His fixation on style, disdain for labor, and sardonic distance from conventional societal values distinguish him from the Victorian masculine standard of industriousness, gravity, and moral integrity. Instead of seeking masculine dominance or influence, Goring favors aesthetics, witty sayings, and enjoyment. This outright rejection of conformity transforms into an act of queerness. Goring's identity is not fixed but enacted a series of gestures, speech patterns, and tastes that parody rather than affirm dominant masculinity. He is, as Butler might say, “doing gender wrong,” and in doing so, he exposes the artificiality of gender roles. His performance as a dandy does not aim for authenticity but delights in surface, in irony, in contradiction. In this sense, Lord Goring queer masculinity by revealing its theatrical construction.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity posits that identity is not something one is, but something one does, an ongoing performance regulated by social norms. Sir Robert Chiltern is constantly performing the role of the “ideal husband,” as expected by his wife Lady Chiltern and by Victorian society at large. This performance is rigid and unforgiving, bound to ideals of masculine authority, moral infallibility, and social success.

Lady Chiltern, idolizing her husband as a moral paragon, contributes to the suffocating expectations that Sir Robert must fulfill. Her demand for perfection mirrors the way society idealizes heterosexual union as the ultimate moral configuration. Sir Robert, however, knows that he is not perfect. The tension between his true self and the identity he must perform echoes the queer individual's experience of constantly “passing” in a

world that refuses to accept difference. Wilde, a closeted queer man when the play was written, imbues Sir Robert with the emotional texture of someone living a double life, thus queering his ostensibly heterosexual narrative.

José Esteban Muñoz: Disidentification

Muñoz's concept of disidentification is especially useful for understanding Wilde's strategy. Disidentification refers to the process by which marginalized subjects neither fully assimilate into nor reject the dominant culture, but instead repurpose its narratives for subversive ends. In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde uses the conventions of the society comedy not to affirm Victorian values but to expose their contradictions. As Muñoz puts it, "Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 11). The form of the play becomes a queer space precisely because of its ambivalence.

The Emotional Core of the Play: Not a Marriage, but a Bond Between Men

The storyline of *An Ideal Husband* seemingly revolves around the importance of heterosexual unions, specifically Sir Robert's marriage to Lady Chiltern and later, Lord Goring's commitment to Mabel. However, neither connection is depicted with the depth of feeling or conflict that characterizes the bond between Sir Robert and Lord Goring. Sir Robert reveals more to Goring than to his own spouse. He is concerned about Goring's opinions, yearns for his support, and confides in him with confidential matters that have the potential to ruin his existence.

Their relationship is shaped by concealment, exposure, and salvation, aspects that reflect the historical setting of queer men experiencing danger. Goring is aware of Sir Robert's most intimate secret but refrains from condemning him. Instead, he protects, encourages, and eventually saves him. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea of "homosocial desire," which describes a range of male relationships that alternate between non-romantic companionship and repressed sexual attraction in societies that penalize homosexuality, is in line with their relationship.

Conclusion: Love in the Shadows

The relationship between Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband* can be read as a covert homosexual romance, one that is expressed through intense emotional fidelity rather than overt attraction, is concealed by social conventions, and is alluded to through subliminal clues. Wilde explores the idea of queer intimacy that endures within a relationship despite social norms. A more expansive understanding of love, commitment, and self-identity is made possible by their emotional bond, which is based on protecting one another, forgiving one another, and unspoken loyalty. It also challenges the predominance of heterosexual love stories. Wilde leaves behind a legacy of queer tenacity with these characters, acting as a constant reminder that love can endure despite being unsaid and concealed.

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