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Fog-Clearing and the “Irish Dimension” in Oscar Wilde’s Three Society Plays

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Abstract:

Despite growing scholarly interest in how Oscar Wilde’s Irish heritage shaped the form and content of his creative works, critics exploring this area have paid less attention to his three society plays than to his fiction and his final play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In seeking to rectify that imbalance, this essay first addresses the analytical implications of Wilde’s suggestion in 1893 that his own performed and planned society plays, along with certain works by his countryman George Bernard Shaw, constituted an “Hibernian” or “Celtic School”, whose key goals were to celebrate Henrik Ibsen, to deprecate theatrical censorship, and to extirpate the English “intellectual fogs” of Puritanism and Philistinism. Examining Wilde’s depictions of Puritanism, London society, and English national character in the three plays, the essay argues that their Irish facets turn out to be relatively modest in scale, consisting not of the allegorically encoded political commentaries previous critics claimed to discover in Wilde’s fiction and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but instead strategies of plot, characterization, and dialogue designed to alert England to the urgent need “to clear” away its “intellectual fogs”.

Keywords: English National Character, English Puritanism, Ireland, Oscar Wilde, Society Plays

Over the past three decades, academic attention to Oscar Wilde’s nationality and its influence on his creativity has steadily grown¹. This increasing interest includes scholarly debate concerning how best to identify “Irish dimensions” in Wilde’s creative works². In his essays and speeches, letters and lectures, reviews and interviews, Wilde explicitly addressed Irish affairs, but in his poetry, drama and fiction he did not. Consequently, one technique for disclosing allegedly hidden “Irish dimen-

¹ For discussions of key criticism about Wilde and Irishness from the 1980s to the mid-2010s, see Haslam 2014a, Markey 2014, Killeen 2015. On more recent criticism, see Haslam 2020.

² For both the term “Irish dimension” and a skeptical perspective on the critical methods employed to identify it, see Small 2000, 67.

sion[s]” in Wilde’s creative pieces became popular: treating the works as if they were intentionally constructed allegories, whose supposedly encoded content the ingenious critic decoded³. The most frequent candidates for this millennia-old methodology (formerly called *hyponoia*, more recently termed ‘allegoresis’) have been *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *The Happy Prince* (1888), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)⁴. In the latter, Gwendolen begs Jack to stop mentioning “the weather” because “[w]hen ever people” bring it up, she is sure “they mean something else,” which causes her to feel “so nervous”; Jack replies, “I do mean something else” (Wilde 2019, 776). For critics in search of an “Irish dimension” in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the short stories, the “something else” usually means concealed political commentary. Nonetheless, recent Hibernicizing-via-allegorizing critics have paid surprisingly little attention to Wilde’s society plays, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), perhaps because their comparative realism (in plot, setting, and characterization, if not dialogue) affords greater resistance to allegoresis than the fairy tale and Gothic milieu of much of his fiction⁵. Responding to the imbalance in critical attention, this essay seeks to answer several questions. Do the society plays possess a distinctive and substantive “Irish dimension”? If so, where can it be found, and how extensive is it?

A useful starting-point for addressing these issues is W.B. Yeats’s review in *United Ireland* of Wilde’s *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891). Yeats cites Wilde’s claim (from the revised, expanded *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) that “[b]eer, [the B]ible, and the seven deadly virtues have made [our] England what she is” (Yeats 1970, 110-111, citing with errors Wilde 2005, 335). In words that anticipate fellow countryman George Bernard Shaw’s 1895 review of *An Ideal Husband*, Yeats claims that “part of the Nemesis that has fallen upon” England “is a complete inability to understand anything” Wilde states, but “[w]e [in Ireland] should not find him so unintelligible – for much about him is Irish of the Irish” (1970, 111). As Shaw does later, Yeats sees in Wilde’s “life and works an extravagant Celtic crusade against Anglo-Saxon stupidity”, in which he “peppers John Bull with his peashooter of wit” (*ibidem*). Commenting on the title story of Wilde’s volume, Yeats finds in it “something of the same spirit that filled Ireland once with gallant, irresponsible ill-doing, but now it is in its right place making merry among the things of the mind, and laughing gaily at our most firm fixed convictions” – and Yeats locates this same “spirit” in Shaw (110-111)⁶.

Yeats’s recognition of affinities between Wilde and Shaw is prophetic: two years later, when sending Shaw a published copy of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde inscribed the volume “‘Op. 1 of the Hibernian School, London ’93’”, and Hesketh Pearson subsequently identified the succeeding works of what Wilde elsewhere called “the great Celtic School” as Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance*, Shaw’s *The Philanderer* (1893) and *An Ideal Hus-*

³ For critiques of allegoresis in Wilde studies, see Haslam 2014a; 2020; for the endorsement of a modified form of allegoresis, see Killeen 2015.

⁴ On allegoresis and *hyponoia*, see Grondin 1994, 17-44.

⁵ For example, Killeen (2005) ignores the three society plays; Ó Donghaile (2020) ignores *A Woman of No Importance* and allocates two sentences to *An Ideal Husband* and two pages to *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Regarding the latter, Ó Donghaile misattributes a reference Lord Darlington makes about Lady Windermere as being about Mrs. Erlynne (2020, 228) (see Wilde 1999, 65).

⁶ On Yeats’s observation, see also Jerusha McCormack, who argues that Wilde’s “use of English was not about power but about power plays” (2015, 26). For a detailed and insightful analysis of Wilde’s artistic influence on Yeats, see Doody 2018.

band (2000, 563)⁷. Given these plays’ thematic and stylistic differences, what might unify them sufficiently for Wilde to believe they formed a national “School”? Wilde’s letter to Shaw three months earlier provides a possible answer: “we are both Celtic, and I like to think that we are friends” (554)⁸. After praising Shaw’s *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) (“such a delight to me that I constantly take it up, and always find it stimulating and refreshing”) and saluting Shaw’s critique of “the ridiculous institution of a stage-censorship” (from which Wilde had suffered the previous year, with the banning of performances of *Salomé*), he declared, “England is the land of intellectual fogs but you have done much to clear the air” (*ibidem*)⁹. For Wilde, then, key goals of the “Celtic” or “Hibernian” (but, interestingly, not Irish) “School” included celebrating Ibsen, deprecating “stage-censorship”, and extirpating the English “intellectual fogs” of Philistinism and Puritanism¹⁰. Building on Wilde’s implicit mission statement, this essay argues that the “Irish dimension” in his society plays turns out to be relatively modest in scale and consists not of the allegorically encoded political commentaries previous critics claimed to discover in Wilde’s fiction and *The Importance of Being Earnest* but instead strategies of plot, characterization, and dialogue designed to alert England to the urgent need “to clear” away its “intellectual fogs”.

1. Lady Windermere’s Fan: “*London is too full of fogs*”

The letter to Shaw was far from Wilde’s first reprimand of English attitudes and practices. On several occasions during his 1882 North American tour, he condemned England’s Philistinism, Puritanism, and political oppression of Ireland, and he maintained these stances in a number of book reviews and by joining the Liberal and pro-Home-Rule Eighty Club in 1887¹¹. Wilde’s censuring of England (and, especially, its newspapers) intensified rapidly in response to the harsh reviews *The Picture of Dorian Gray* received after its June 1890 publication. Over the next eleven months, he criticized England’s national character, its journalism, and its Philistinism and Puritanism in letters to the *St. James’s Gazette*, *Daily Chronicle* and *Scots Observer*; in the essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891) and in revisions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and to his essays in dialogue “The Decay of Lying” (1889; 1891) and “The Critic as Artist” (1890; 1891)¹². Since “The Soul” appeared in February 1891, the revised *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in April, and the revised “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” in May (as part of *Intentions*), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* controversy was still relatively fresh for Wilde during the summer of 1891, when he wrote *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. The play’s primary satirical targets are Puritans and “London Society”, which the play treats as two avatars of English national character (Small 1999, xix)¹³. Yet, whereas Lady Windermere’s ethical

⁷ On Pearson’s identification of the plays, see note 2 in Wilde 2000, 563.

⁸ On Wilde and Shaw’s interactions, see Weintraub 1993; Roche 2013; Cavendish-Jones 2019. Grene (2020) examines Wilde’s and Shaw’s interactions with Yeats. On Wilde’s use of the term “Celtic”, both in his epistolary exchange with Shaw and on other occasions, see Doody 2018, 83-86.

⁹ On the banning of *Salomé*, see Ellmann 1988, 372-374; Sturgis 2018, 454-456.

¹⁰ On Wilde’s admiration of Ibsen, see Powell 1990, 73-89.

¹¹ For his interviews during the American tour, see Wilde 2010; 2022. On the Eighty Club, see Wright, Kinsella 2015.

¹² For Wilde’s epistolary protests at reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’s first edition, see Wilde 2000, 428-449. On his subsequent revisions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, see Haslam 2014b. For the subsequent revisions to “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist”, see Wilde 2007, 78, 189-190, 192-193.

¹³ Ian Small defines “London Society” as “an élite” marked “by political, social and cultural fame, but first and foremost by birth” (1999, xix). For a fuller discussion, see Small 1999, xix-xxxiii.

reeducation constitutes a rebuke to Puritanism's prioritization of medieval morals over modern manners, London Society's deceitful values prove more impervious to change, as revealed when Mrs Erlynne decides to return abroad, after ensnaring her new husband, Lord Augustus Lorton (Small 1999, xxxii-xxxiii).

To reproach Puritanism, the play shows how Lady Windermere's close-call in avoiding an adulterous elopement with Lord Darlington catalyzes a character change: she transforms from someone possessing "something of the Puritan", who permits "no compromise" "between what is right and what is wrong", into someone who no longer believes "people can be divided into the good and the bad, as though they were two separate races or creations" (Wilde 1999, 9, 73-74)¹⁴. Nevertheless, she still prefers to venerate certain "ideals" (including her herhagiographic recollection of the mother she believes dead) rather than to embrace fully the "[r]ealities" that Erlynne (her disguised – and distinctly unsaintly – mother) recommends (83). After Lady Windermere declares, "[i]f I lost my ideals, I should lose everything", Erlynne decides to let her daughter retain those necessary "illusions" (84, 80)¹⁵. This decision lends dramatic irony to one of Lady Windermere's renunciations of Puritanism. When Windermere tells her that "you and she [Erlynne] belong to different worlds", since "[i]nto your world evil has never entered", Lady Windermere replies, "[t]here is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand" (87-88). But it is not quite "the same [epistemic] world for all" (*ibidem*), since Lady Windermere never learns that her mother abandoned her, Windermere never learns that his wife (temporarily) abandoned him, Augustus never learns that Erlynne manipulated him, and Darlington never learns that Lady Windermere visited him¹⁶. Erlynne alone knows all of the secrets.

The implication that keeping certain secrets is vital to London Society's smooth functioning (and that revealing them is dangerous) forms a key part of the play's satire of the dominating social order. "I don't know what society is coming to", the Duchess of Berwick tells Lady Windermere, since "[t]he most dreadful people seem to go everywhere" (14). She then reveals the secret "[t]he whole of London" and "everyone in London" knows: Windermere has been visiting the notorious Erlynne frequently and protractedly (8, 22). When Windermere subsequently pressures his wife to invite Erlynne to her twenty-first birthday party, he emphasizes that she "wants to get back into society" and this requires invitations "to houses where women who are in what is called Society nowadays do go" (24). Still in Puritan mode at this point, Lady Windermere retorts that "[i]f a woman really repents, she never wishes to return to the society that has *made or seen* her ruin" (25; my emphasis). At this early stage in her ethical journey, the potential irony of the phrase "made or seen" escapes her.

In Act II, the infatuated Augustus asks Windermere to help Erlynne enter "this demmed thing called Society" (33). Later, when Darlington begs Lady Windermere to run away with him, since she now knows of her husband's apparent infidelity, he does not pretend that "the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society", since "[t]hey matter a great deal" – in fact, "far too much" (42). Similarly, although Erlynne is initially

¹⁴ Concerning Lady Windermere's ultimate rejection of binary moral dichotomies, compare Shaw's conclusion to the book Wilde praised so highly: to "those who may think that I have forgotten to reduce Ibsenism to a formula for them [...] its quintessence is that there is no formula" (1891, 134).

¹⁵ On Ibsen's persistent critique of illusions, see Shaw 1891. For an insightful analysis of the interrogation of idealism in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and other works by Wilde, see Eltis 2017, 277-278.

¹⁶ Richard Ellmann mentions the first three secrets but overlooks the Darlington one (1988, 364). On the function of lies in the play, see Small 1999, xxix-xxxii.

happy to "see that there are just as many fools in society as there used to be", she is surprised and chastened by the sudden maternal feeling that compels her to protect her daughter's reputation at the risk of her own recently reclaimed one (47). Consequently, she tells Lady Windermere that she plans "to live abroad again" because "[t]he English climate doesn't suit" her and her "heart is affected here" (75). She prefers "living in the south" because "London is too full of fogs and – and serious people"; she is unsure "[w]hether the fogs produce the serious people or whether the serious people produce the fogs", "but the whole thing rather gets on my nerves" (76)¹⁷.

Erlynn's indictments of "the English climate" and London's "fogs" and "serious people" anticipate Wilde's claim to Shaw that "England is the land of intellectual fogs" (2000, 554), but the play's satire of London Society nevertheless constitutes a much milder critique of the reigning social order than either the more direct (and less commercially successful) denunciations of Shaw and Ibsen, or the critiques contained in several of Wilde's 1890-1891 publications (see Small 1999, xxiv, xxvii-xxix, xxxii-xxxiii)¹⁸. Whereas Wilde's "Soul of Man" calls for English society's complete restructuring, *Lady Windermere's Fan* advocates for significant ethical change not in the larger system but only in the lives of specific individuals (xxxii-xxxiii). Thus, if we treat Wilde's critique of England as a valid "Irish dimension" in his work (as his invocation of an "Hibernian School" and a "Celtic School" suggests we should), then it operates at a scale that is much smaller in *Lady Windermere's Fan* than in Wilde's book reviews and essays and in the revised *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This reduced scale (along with the play's resistance to allegoresis) may explain why Wilde's recent Hibernicizing critics have shown less interest in analyzing the society plays¹⁹.

In ironic contrast, however, an "Irish dimension" more specific than anything in *Lady Windermere's Fan* emerges in Charles Brookfield and Jimmy Glover's *The Poet and the Puppets: A Travesty Suggested by "Lady Windermere's Fan"*, which premiered in May 1892, three months after Wilde's play (Ellmann 1988, 369-370; Sturgis 2018, 447-448). In addition to burlesquing his career, his literary creations, his alleged plagiarism, and his supposed condescension to actors and audience, the travesty sought to sink Wilde's social status by restoring to him the Irish accent he said he had lost at Oxford (Ellmann 1988, 38). Brookfield and Glover's parody opens with "[m]ysterious music which gradually resolves itself into an Irish jig" (2003, 217), and the Poet (Wilde) then sings, to the tune of "Saint Patrick's Day":

When first I was hurled on the face of this world
 People thought 'twas a thunderbolt fallen.
 But when they found who had arrived a Hurroo!
 Rent the air - faith 'twas something appalling!
 Then a crowd came along many thousand men strong
 To gaze on this wonderful child.

¹⁷ Lord Augustus, happy to accompany Mrs Erlynn abroad, also decries the "demmed climate", along with "[d]emmed clubs", "demmed cooks", and "demmed everything" (Wilde 1999, 88).

¹⁸ As Matthew Sturgis argues, the play's "distinction was not just its scintillating dialogue but also its blithe dissection (*and acceptance*) of society's convenient hypocrisies and double standards" (2018, 424; my emphasis). See also Williams 2020, 103-104.

¹⁹ Noreen Doody sees in the Act Two exchange between the Duchess of Berwick and the Australian Mr. Hopper "a double laugh for the colonized listener at the grand dismissiveness and disregard of the imperialist for a whole continent and its people" (2018, 76). However, as Josephine Guy notes in her "Commentary" on *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde included a "pejorative representation of Australia" in several of his works, so the humor here is more likely to be at Australia's expense rather than in its defense (2021, 546).

For they knew by his cry and the fire in his eye
It was neighbour O'Flaherty's child. (Brookfield, Glover 2003, 217; Ellmann 1988, 369-370)

After Brookfield and Glover read Wilde the script (at his request), he displayed patronizing indulgence, but he felt considerably less tolerant a few weeks after the travesty's premiere, when England's play licenser E.F.S. Pigott banned performances of *Salomé* (Ellmann 1988, 372-373; Sturgis 2018, 454-456). In an interview with *The Pall Mall Budget* to protest this "most contemptible" act, Wilde indignantly compared Pigott's consent for "the personality of an artist to be presented in a caricature on the stage [the travesty]" with his refusal to "allow the work of that artist to be shown under very rare and very beautiful conditions" (Wilde 1979d, 188). When writing to William Rothenstein about the ban, Wilde was sufficiently incensed to insert three exclamation marks: "at the same moment when he [Pigott] prohibited *Salomé*, he licenced a burlesque of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in which an actor dressed up like me and imitated my voice and manner!!!" (Wilde 2000, 531-532). He also lamented the absence of protest against such "censorship" by any actors or theater critics except William Archer: "[t]his shows how bad our stage must be, and also shows how Philistine the English journalists are" (533)²⁰.

In *The Pall Mall Budget* interview, Wilde sounded a similarly anti-English note, declaring that he did not wish to call himself "a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in its artistic judgement" and that he was "not English" but "Irish – which is quite another thing" (1979d, 188). To a French interviewer, he stated that English "people are essentially anti-artistic and narrow-minded"; that he has "English friends to whom [...] he is] attached[,] but [he does] not love [...] the English" people as a whole; that "[t]here is a great deal of hypocrisy in England"; and that "[t]he typical Briton is Tartuffe seated in his shop behind the counter" (190). *Lady Windermere's Fan* lacks this kind of explicit anti-English hostility, but Wilde had voiced similar sentiments in the expanded *Dorian Gray*, so it is unsurprising that *A Woman of No Importance*, begun a few weeks after the *Salomé* ban, draws heavily upon dialogue from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Small 1993, xxix-xxx; Ellmann 1988, 381).

2. A Woman of No Importance: "like a dead thing smeared with gold"

Wilde's anger at caricature and censorship fueled this most anti-English of his society plays, yet its harshest critique is voiced not by the English dandy Lord Illingworth (a variation on *Dorian Gray's* Sir Henry Wotton) but the American Puritan Hester Worsley. After overhearing what Wilde's draft notes call a "fin de siècle conversation on marriage" among Lady Hunstanton's female guests, Hester expresses disapproval and distinguishes between English society and "true American society", which "consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country" (Small 1993, xxxvi; Wilde 1993, 43). Seeking to smooth things over, Hunstanton concedes that "in England we have too many artificial social barriers", but Hester remains unmollified:

You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live – you don't even know that. You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you

²⁰ See also Wilde's letter to William Archer (2000, 534).

can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong. (Wilde 1993, 44)²¹

The first-night audience subjected to this reproof included Arthur Balfour, Chief Secretary of Ireland, and the Liberal Unionist MP Joseph Chamberlain, but the lines were cut from later performances, perhaps in response to some jeers accompanying the applause at the final curtain (Ellmann 1988, 381; Sturgis 2018, 478). Wilde retained Illingworth's censure of "the British intellect", which echoes passages in "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but Hester's and Illingworth's critiques of English society and national character are ultimately weakened because Hester (like Mrs Erlynne) plans to depart England at the play's end (accompanied by her fiancé Gerald Arbuthnot and his mother Mrs. Arbuthnot) and also because Illingworth is finally portrayed as a callous, controlling "man of no importance" (Wilde 1993, 20, 112; 2005, 320; 2007, 101)²². In addition, as with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, at the play's close the established social order dominates still²³.

Nonetheless, like the earlier play, *A Woman of No Importance* includes a sustained repudiation of Puritanism, both English and American. With respect to the English brand, *A Woman of No Importance* mocks the pompous M.P. Mr Kelvil, who spends the mornings during his stay at Hunstanton Chase "writing" on "Purity", his "usual subject", since he believes "the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard" (Wilde 1993, 13-14). Kelvil laments that Illingworth appears "lacking in that fine faith in the nobility and purity of life which is so important in this century" and "does not appreciate the beauty of our English home-life", "the mainstay of our moral system in England" (Wilde 1993, 21-22). Unsurprisingly, the play's two dandies, Illingworth and Mrs Allonby, scorn Hester as a Puritan, and Allonby's dare to Illingworth to kiss Hester sets in motion the climax of Act III, in which Mrs Arbuthnot, to prevent Gerald from striking Illingworth (for assaulting Hester), reveals to Gerald that Illingworth is his father (27-29, 87-88).

Yet, by forcing himself on Hester in Act III, Illingworth wrong-foots the play's previous pro-dandy and anti-Puritan stance, and this may explain why Wilde removed from an earlier draft Illingworth's shrill and extended condemnation of English Puritanism, which had been originally placed in the same act (119-20)²⁴. In contrast, Hester's reeducation constitutes a more successful critique of Puritanism: like *Lady Windermere*, Hester switches from maintaining that "the sins of the parents" being "visited on the children" represents "a just law" and "God's law", to admitting that she "was wrong" and that "God's law is only Love" (80, 102). Her new perspective explains why, a little earlier, she defies her fiancé Gerald and encourages Mrs Arbuthnot not to marry Illingworth, since "[t]hat would be real dishonour" and "real disgrace" (100). The scale of her peripeteia is highlighted when Illingworth asks which "*fînde-siècle* person" persuaded Gerald to stop pressuring his mother to marry Illingworth; Mrs

²¹ Michael McAteer links the "leper in purple" and "dead thing smeared with gold" similes to ornate diction of *Salomé* (2016, 28-29).

²² Lord Illingworth's line "Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation" (Wilde 1993, 60) is, according to David Alderson, an implicitly Irish challenge to "the restrictive English puritan mentality" (1997, 52).

²³ However, the fact that Lord Illingworth is portrayed negatively by the play's end may (or may not) transform his earlier defense of society into Wilde's muted critique of it: "[t]o be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy. Society is a necessary thing" (Wilde 1993, 68).

²⁴ The excised speech drew heavily on anti-Puritan passages from the revised *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Arbuthnot replies, “The Puritan”, at which Illingworth “[w]inces” (110). Thus, as in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde’s effort to dispel English “intellectual fogs” is more successful with Puritanism than with the ruling social order, even though the Puritan in this case happens to be American.

As also happened with *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance’s* success generated satiric pushback, some of which again featured an anti-Irish component, including cartoons in *Punch* and *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* that depicted Wilde and the play’s characters as members of a Christy minstrelsy troupe (Mendelssohn 2018, 238; Plates 44 and 45). Michèle Mendelssohn has linked these caricatures to minstrelsy routines that Wilde may (or may not) have witnessed or read about a decade earlier during his USA tour, some of which were designed to satirize his aesthetic creed and Irish heritage, and she argues that the memory of these routines helped in turn to shape his society plays: “[e]xposure to Irish and black caricatures taught Wilde what he needed to know to turn his eye on *fin de siècle* Anglo-American socialites, and turn them into characters who quipped like minstrels” (238). She acknowledges that “[n]owhere did he mention that [...his dramatic techniques] were also hallmarks of Christy minstrelsy” (231) and also that he “didn’t mention these satirists in his correspondence”, but she believes “it would be absurd to imagine that he didn’t know about them” (239). Mendelssohn’s argument that Wilde’s artistic “approach” in the society plays was “minstrel-inspired” and resulted in “his own kind of whiteface theatre” relies on indirect rather than direct evidence (*ibidem*). This indirect evidence includes the comparisons that reviewers in *Punch*, *Judy*, and *The Guardian* newspaper made between *A Woman of No Importance’s* dialogue and Christy minstrelsy exchanges (237). Yet, as John Cooper notes, “there is no evidence that Wilde’s staging of comic repartee was intentionally imitative of interlocutor minstrelsy”; Cooper also highlights another crucial factor: “the comic press” were seeking “to denigrate Wilde by suggesting such a connection” (2019 n.p.). With similar impulses to belittle, Brookfield and Glovertoo had included a Christy minstrelsy sketch in their travesty of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (2003, 237-240). Mendelssohn notes the minstrelsy section in *The Poet and the Puppets* but misses a key related question: since satirists and hostile reviewers were using minstrelsy to mock Wilde, why would he then borrow from it for his own work? (2018, 227-228). Thus, as with the relationship between *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *The Poet and The Puppets*, the satiric response to *A Woman of No Importance* in the reviewers’ use of minstrelsy comparisons actually constituted an “Irish dimension” (in the form of anti-Irishness) as large in scope as anything in Wilde’s play itself.

3. An Ideal Husband: “you know what your English newspapers are like”

As in the two earlier plays, a key plot strand of *An Ideal Husband* traces the ethical reeducation of a Puritan, in this case Lady Gertrude Chiltern: she changes from someone who adores “ideals” and imposes them on her husband Sir Robert (who finds her “pitiless in her perfection – cold and stern and without mercy”), into someone who learns (in Lord Goring’s words) that “[n]obody is incapable of doing a foolish thing” or “a wrong thing”, and “that life cannot be understood [...] cannot be lived without much charity” (Wilde 2013, 45, 81-82, 99, 63)²⁵. The blackmailer Mrs Cheveley offers an additional critique of Puritanism, as she taunts her intended victim Robert:

²⁵ On the play’s critique of idealism and its connections to Ibsen and Shaw, see Eltis’s Introduction (2013, xix-xx).

Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins – one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man – now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it. (32-33)

Nevertheless, as was the case with Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, Cheveley's negative characterization ultimately weakens the play's overall denunciation of English Puritanism.

On the other hand, Wilde's critique of "London Society" builds to some degree upon Cheveley's negativity. Lady Markby congratulates herself on her "small shred of decent reputation", which is "just enough to prevent the lower classes making painful observations through the windows of the carriage", and she contends that "our Society is terribly overpopulated" and "someone should arrange a proper scheme of assisted emigration"; agreeing with her, Cheveley comments that, on returning to London after several years, she finds "Society has become dreadfully mixed", and "[o]ne sees the oddest people everywhere", a comment with which she unknowingly criticizes herself (71)²⁶. Lord Caversham, who is depicted much more positively than Cheveley, anticipates the irony of this critique by declaring he is "[s]ick of London Society" (8) for being insufficiently exclusive and for consisting of "a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing" (21). Nevertheless, Caversham's critiques are challenged by the play's two most positively depicted characters: Goring, Caversham's son, tells his father that he "love[s] talking about nothing", since "[i]t is the only thing I know anything about"; and Mabel Chiltern professes to "love London Society" because "it has immensely improved" and "is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics", which is "[j]ust what Society should be" (2, 8).

The play's unstable critiques of English Puritanism and "London Society" are matched by its conflicted depictions of English national character. Cheveley voices the most negative observations about the English, but (as noted) she is also the play's least positively portrayed character. She claims that "a typical Englishman" is "always dull and usually violent"; and earlier, after denouncing English Puritanism, she reminds Robert of "what your English newspapers are like" and asks him to "[t]hink of their loathsome joy", of "the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in", and of "the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard" (78, 33-34)²⁷. The play supplements this critique of English newspapers with Robert's claim that "spies are of no use nowadays", since "[t]he newspapers do their work instead", to which Goring replies, "And thunderingly well they do it" (97). However, Robert's guilty past undermines to some degree the ethos of such denunciations, as can be seen when he issues a haughty dismissal: "[y]ou have lived so long abroad, Mrs Cheveley, that you seem to be unable to realize

²⁶ The reference to a "scheme of assisted emigration" may (or may not) disclose another "Irish dimension" to the play.

²⁷ As Eltis points out, these remarks appear to refer to scandals involving Sir Charles Dilke and Charles Stewart Parnell (2013, xx), which makes the Parnell allusion another, if minor, "Irish dimension". Similar allusions to the Parnell and Dilke scandals occur in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (Wilde 2007, 255-256, 575-576). On Wilde's admiration for Parnell, especially during his political and personal trials, see Ellmann 1988, 289-290; Sturgis 2018, 358-359. Mrs Cheveley's milder critiques of the English (Wilde 2003, 27, 35, 37, 104-106) include her observation that "[i]f one could only teach the English how to talk, and the Irish how to listen, society here [in London] would be quite civilized" (Wilde 2013, 106).

that you are talking to an English gentleman"; she replies, "I realize that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret" (31). Later, she sarcastically describes Robert to Goring as "so upright a gentleman, so honourable an English gentleman" (113). Thus, the "Irish dimension" inherent in the play's critique of Englishness and English newspapers is undermined to some degree because it is primarily voiced by ethically compromised characters like Cheveley and Robert.

At the same time, a counter-current of dialogue explicitly and implicitly praises Englishness and the Empire. Goring tells Robert that to confess to his crime means Robert "would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician", with "nothing left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church" (54-55). Yet Goring prefaces this anti-English critique by saying "one of the best things" about "the English" is that they "can't stand a man who is always saying he is in the right, but they are very fond of a man who admits that he has been in the wrong" (54)²⁸. In addition, Caversham, described as "[a] fine Whig type", approvingly quotes *The Times'* praise of Robert as one who "[r]epresents what is best in English public life" and who makes a "[n]oble contrast to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians"; Caversham later claims that Sir Robert has "got what we want so much in political life nowadays – high character, high moral tone, high principles" (7, 117, 131). This might initially be viewed as dramatic irony, but Robert ultimately preserves his secret and salvages his career, and the play does not appear to disapprove of his decisions to reject confession and resignation²⁹.

Neither does the play challenge the positive image of the British Empire that Robert promotes. He describes the "Argentine [Canal Company] scheme" as "a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle", in contrast to the British Government's purchase of "Suez Canal shares", which was "a very great and splendid undertaking" that "gave us our direct route to India", and whose "imperial value" made it "necessary that we should have control" (28). This too might initially be treated as dramatic irony, but the play's ending implicitly confers approval on Robert's pro-imperial stance, as Caversham congratulates him on receiving a "seat in the Cabinet": "[i]f the country doesn't go to the dogs or the Radicals, we shall have you Prime Minister, some day" (140)³⁰.

The play's seeming complicity in imperialism and Machiavellianism raises questions for some contemporary critics: "[w]as Wilde satirising or flattering the privileged elite? Was the play suggesting that moral probity was politically essential or distractingly irrelevant...?" (Eltis 2013, vii). Its sexism raises further questions: "[w]as the play suggesting [...] that women were to be excluded from the political sphere, or that their contribution was an essential counterbalance to men's self-serving ambition?" (*ibidem*). The most pressing question concerns Goring's Act IV homily to Lady Chiltern, which sounds extremely sexist to many contemporary ears:

²⁸ A similar mix of critique and praise pervades Lady Markby's comment to Mabel that she "will always be as pretty as possible", which "is the best fashion there is, and the only fashion that England succeeds in setting" (70).

²⁹ Wilde's implicit indulgence of the flaws of both Robert and London society emerges in an interview: "if Robert Chiltern, the Ideal Husband, were a common clerk, *the humanity of his tragedy* would be none the less poignant. I have placed him in the higher ranks of life merely because *that is the side of social life with which I am best acquainted*. In a play dealing with actualities to write with ease one must write with knowledge" (Wilde 1979c, 250; my emphasis).

³⁰ Given Caversham's positive depiction, his remarks complicate both Michael McAteer's contention that the play is an "*exposé* of the corrupt nature of Imperial finance" (2016, 34) and Sos Eltis's summing up of Robert as a "corrupt politician" and of the play as "Wilde's most pointed exercise in demolishing the language of moral superiority in the specific context of English national identity" (2017, 279).

You love Robert. Do you want to kill his love for you? What sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his ambition, if you take him from the splendour of a great political career, if you close the doors of public life against him, if you condemn him to sterile failure, he who was made for triumph and success? Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself? A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them. (Wilde 2013, 134-135)

Soon after digesting this patriarchal advice, Lady Chiltern regurgitates it to Robert:

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! (136)

Seeking to salvage Wilde's radical reputation from such a reactionary episode, Sos Eltis points to problems in the play concerning coherence, contemporary performance decisions, and audience reception. Regarding the first, she argues that "[t]he play does not establish a consistent viewpoint on the issues it raises" (2013, xv). She acknowledges that Goring's speech "is particularly problematic", since "it is positioned as the traditional *raisonneur's* final verdict", but she maintains that it "comes as something of a surprise from the character who delivers it and is hard to read as the logical conclusion of the preceding action" (Wilde 2013, xvi). This difficulty supposedly arises because in Act II Goring "dismissed his friend's worship of wealth and power over others as 'a thoroughly shallow creed'", and "it is hard to see how the intervening action could have given Goring a higher opinion of his friend's desire for greater political power" (Eltis 2013, xvi, citing Wilde 2013, 51). Regarding performance issues, Eltis argues that "Lady Chiltern's unlikely word-for-word parroting of Goring's advice tends not to validate his words but rather to teeter on the edge of absurdity – an inherent instability which leads most directors to cut her speech drastically" (Eltis 2013, xvi). Finally, regarding reception issues, she concludes that "*An Ideal Husband* is a deceptive and indeterminate play, which can offer different meanings according to the assumptions of its audience members" (xxii)³¹.

Eltis's points regarding performance and reception are relevant, but the origin of the play's supposed puzzles can be accounted for just as parsimoniously by acknowledging our contemporary unease at its sexism and imperialism. Concerning the puzzle of apparent character inconsistency, a solution can be inferred from Eltis's recognition that "[g]oring separates male intellect from female emotion and apparently consigns women to a purely domestic and supportive role" (xvi). In other words, in Act II Goring speaks to Robert man to man, but in Act IV he speaks to Lady Chiltern man to woman. Between those conversations, he speaks to Cheveley and exonerates Robert's crime as "an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore [...] not his true character" (Wilde 2013, 107). Thus, *contra* Eltis's argument, the play actually does possess in Goring a coherent, stable, and determinate spokesperson – and one who also happens to speak for Wilde.

³¹ Compare Eltis's defense of *An Ideal Husband* in 1996, 152-169. Kristian Williams also struggles to reconcile the play's reactionary politics with the more radical positions Wilde adopts elsewhere (2020, 105-111).

We know this because in an 1895 interview he defined the play's "entire psychology" as "the difference in the way in which a man loves a woman from that in which a woman loves a man, the passion that women have for making ideals (which is their weakness) and the weakness of a man who dare not show his imperfections to the thing he loves"; for examples of this "psychology", he pointed to the Chilterns' exchanges at the end of Act I and II and to Goring's Act IV speech, in which he "points out the higher importance of a man's life over a woman's" (Wilde 1979a, 241)³². Wilde confirmed Goring's exemplary status three years later when composing the play's stage directions: Goring is "[a] *flawless dandy*"; one who "*stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it*"; "*the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought*"; and, in preparing to deliver his gender roles homily to Lady Chiltern, Goring reveals "*the philosopher that underlies the dandy*" (Wilde 2013, 18, 84, 134).

Wilde's reactionary gender ideology is highly germane to any consideration of the play's overall politics, including its possible "Irish dimension", because it furnishes a caveat against the kind of idealizing presentism that would like to preserve Wilde's radical credentials by explaining away or ignoring the play's chauvinism, classism, sexism, and imperialism³³. And Wilde, of course, was not alone in exhibiting an agenda that from our present perspective registers as reactionary. When his "Hibernian School" co-founder Shaw reviewed *An Ideal Husband*, he ignored its regressive aspects, instead praising Wilde as "our only thorough playwright", who "plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audiences, with the whole theatre" (1970, 176). Echoing Yeats's earlier review of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* and highlighting what we would now term the play's "Irish dimension", Shaw declares that for so "acutely Irish an Irishman" as Wilde "there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as an Englishman's seriousness" (177). Shaw maintains the play has "no thesis", but he believes "[t]he modern note" is "struck in Sir Robert Chiltern's assertion of the individuality and courage of his wrongdoing as against the mechanical idealism of his stupidly good wife, and in his bitter criticism of a love that is only the reward of merit" (*ibidem*). As Shaw's review shows, he either does not see or does not acknowledge the sexism and imperialism that make some contemporary critics uneasy³⁴.

³² Eltis cites this interview but ignores its implications for Goring's role as Wilde's spokesperson (2013, xiv).

³³ As Kerry Powell notes, "[r]ecent critics of Wilde have been creative in trying to find something between the lines of this regrettable scene that will exculpate him from the gender essentialism and misogynist politics that bring about narrative closure in *An Ideal Husband*" (2009, 95). Powell's extended analysis of the scene (including its earlier drafts) is invaluable (91-96, 99-100). On Wilde's regressive gender politics when contrasting English with American culture in the 1880s, see Mendelssohn 2012.

³⁴ Some contemporary critics – but not all: Michael McAteer insightfully contextualizes the play's "geographies of empire" but ignores Goring's sexist theory of gender roles (2016, 33), as does Petra Dierkes-Thrun. Although Dierkes-Thrun acknowledges the society plays' "problematic picture of femininity" and "some potentially misogynous aspects in their satire of the upper class's manners and social and moral hypocrisy", she also maintains that "[s]ome feminist scholars have focused too much on these potential misogynous elements and downplayed the more progressive aspects of Wilde's work to the point of distorting the complex picture of Wilde's paradoxical working method" (2015, 76, 92-93); she identifies Victoria White as one scholar with whom she disagrees. White 1998 does critique Wilde's misogyny, as displayed in several works and utterances, but, for some reason, she does not include *An Ideal Husband*. Helen Davies, who also ignores Goring's speech, acknowledges that some critics have discerned "a troubling strand of misogyny" in Wilde's writings, but she also points to critics who "have highlighted" his "commitment to women's interests and rights" (2015, 170). So too, Jerusha McCormack acknowledges that *Salomé* exhibits "violent, not to say hysterical, misogyny" (1998a, 1), but she defends Goring's speech in Act IV as a triumph of "the creed of dandyism" over those who believe the "fiction" of a "single, integrated 'moral' self" (1998b, 91). In contrast, Kristian Williams finds Goring's speech "astonishingly sexist" (2020, 106).

4. Conclusion: Dissolving “fogs” and “lashing vice”

The three society plays continue in a more subdued manner the critique of English values Wilde previously voiced in the expanded *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and various essays, reviews, and interviews. *A Woman of No Importance* is the play most critical of English national character, and *An Ideal Husband* the least. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* avoids that particular target, but (like the other two plays) critiques the upper-class or London society. Nevertheless, perhaps due to commercial British theatre’s conservative constraints, Wilde pulls his punches³⁵. As a result, in all three works, those who pose the greatest threat to the social order choose – or are forced – to leave.

On the other hand, with respect to Wilde’s “Hibernian School” quest to “clear” England’s “air” of “intellectual fogs”, the three plays achieve their greatest artistic success and display their most visible “Irish dimension” in the critique of English (and American) Puritanism (Wilde 2000, 554). This success springs from the fact that the plays’ critique of Puritanism is artistically integrated within plot and characterization, through the narratives of Lady Windermere, Hester Worsley, and Lady Chiltern, whereas (with the exception of Hester) the critique of English national character in *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* is expressed principally through the *bon mots* of frequently contemptuous characters driven by frequently contemptible motives³⁶.

Of course, the society plays’ critique of England’s “intellectual fogs” necessarily introduces a didactic element. Throughout his pre-prison public life, Wilde regularly asserted that literature should avoid moralizing, even though *The Picture of Dorian Gray* debate forced him to admit how difficult he found it “to keep” the novel’s “inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect” and not “too obvious” (478). We should bear that candid admission in mind when reflecting on his response to “[a]n alderman named Routledge”, who “had praised Wilde for calling a spade a spade and for lashing vice in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*” (Ellmann 1988, 367). Wilde rejected both charges and declared that if the work contained any “one particular doctrine” it was “sheer individualism”: “it is not for anyone to censure what anyone else does, and everyone should go his own way, to whatever place he chooses, in exactly the way that he chooses” (Ellmann 1988, 367-368; Sturgis 2018, 448-449). Nonetheless, one “vice” Wilde undoubtedly did enjoy “lashing” was English Puritanism, and that specific form of “censure” indisputably fueled his fog-clearing project and produced the most consistent “Irish dimension” in his society plays.

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³⁵ On these constraints, see Small 1999, xxiv, 1993, xxvi.

³⁶ George Orwell provides a more positive reading of Wilde’s use in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* of a “chorus of worldly ‘sophisticated’ people who keep up a ceaseless running attack upon all the beliefs current in Wilde’s day” (cited in Williams 2020, 114-115).

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