

Wilde was writing at a time when ‘honoured ideals of marriage and relations between the sexes were being challenged as never before.’

Underpinning social attitudes to marriage and morality were Victorian gender expectations and ideologies on sexual orientation.

The OED defines gender as ‘a euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes.’ Our 21st Century understanding of gender is that it is a changeable social construct and not determined by biological features. The commonly held belief at the time of

Wilde’s writing was that gender was as finite as a person’s sex and that consequentially there was a ‘natural’ way for the sexes to act.

Victorians linked behaviour to sex and thus established gender norms; the sex of a man discerns he will be biologically taller than a woman and his gender distinguishes that he will be dynamic and an expender of energy. Consequentially men and women were expected to play different roles in society: ‘men dominated all decision-making in political, legal and economic affairs, whereas women’s intellect was ‘not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. When women attempt to engage politically- an activity reserved for men- they are marked as ineffectual: ‘Returning from a Women’s

Liberal Association meeting wearing a white satin walking dress, it seems that Lady Chiltern’s role in public life provides her merely with a decorative diversion in her leisure hours.’ Society renders women ineffectual in politics leaving them with one of two options: to embrace their ineffectuality, like Lady Chiltern, and be mocked for mere decorative

Through the course of the play, Mrs. Cheveley makes two blackmail attempts—both fail. In order to best make sense of how these two failed attempts fit into patriarchal power dynamics, it is necessary to examine the relationship between

blackmail and patriarchal ideology. Alan Sinfield has argued that ideology's "production is not an external process; stories are not outside ourselves. . . . Ideology makes sense for us, of us, because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world" ("Cultural Materialism" 745). Here, Sinfield is asserting that ideology preexists us and holds an influence over our understanding of the past. Thus, when a person tells a story, ideology allows us to understand that story's continuity with our lived present. When Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert, she is threatening to tell a story that provides a negative representation. The truth value behind a blackmail-story is unimportant when compared to the plausibility of the blackmail story: whether or not the story is true, blackmail relies on prevailing ideologies that allow—or disallow—the plausibility of the story. "The conditions of plausibility are . . . crucial," writes Sinfield, "They govern our understanding of the world and how to live in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change" Mrs. Cheveley seems all too aware of blackmail's reliance on plausibility when she remarks, "I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can't defend it! And I am in attack" Here, "The big battalions" that Mrs. Cheveley refers to are the patriarchal norms of society. Merely telling people that Robert Chiltern was involved in insider trading, by itself, would not be sufficient evidence to ruin him; her word, by itself, would not be considered plausible. She must rely on Baron Arnheim's letter, the words of a man of high social standing, in order to gain power. Already, we can see how Mrs. Cheveley's attempts to control are limited by the statements of men—the plausibility of her story relies upon the patriarchal society she occupies. The trouble with using a physical artifact to blackmail someone is that the blackmailed individual must recognize the plausibility of the narrative attached to the object. While the blackmailed individual may resist the

representation, if they accept the blackmail they are essentially consenting to the representation the object offers. Although Robert Chiltern certainly does not wish to be in Mrs. Cheveley's thrall, by recognizing the power she holds over him with the letter he consents to the plausibility of the letter's story. However, as Mrs. Cheveley use of the letter shows, patriarchal ideology has an influence on the way objects can reflect our identity. Two of Mrs. Cheveley's statements about dresses reveal her understanding of the relationship between object-representation and patriarchal ideology: "I think men are the only authorities on dress" and, later, "a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker". If men "are the only authorities on dress" and "a woman's first duty . . . is to her dressmaker" then a logical conclusion is that a woman's duty rests in the authority of men. Mrs. Cheveley laments this when she states, "Oh, there is only one real tragedy in a woman's life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband". Here, Mrs. Cheveley puts the struggle which women in patriarchal systems face in very concrete terms: women are unable to escape their past and their future rests in the hands of a man they must align themselves for life.

An *Ideal Husband's* narrative confirms the tragedy that Mrs. Cheveley perceives as she is, quite literally, unable to escape her past.² Richard Dellamora argues that "Mrs. Cheveley's pursuit of individuality... is compromised by the fact that she accepts without question the values—wealth, social notoriety, sexual success—of the demimonde" and is thus "subject to the same limitation that attends other women in the play, all whom achieve their goals only through their roles as wives or mistresses". In other words, This point is also demonstrated in the breakup of Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley's engagement, which occurs outside of the text. When the two characters discuss the matter, Lord Goring asserts that his "lawyer settled that matter with Mrs. Cheveley on certain terms". Richard Allen Cave, in a note to the text, suggests that this

means Lord Goring “chivalrously arranged matters so that it appeared as if he were the guilty party, allowing her to sue him for breach of promise to wed” .To protect Mrs. Cheveley’s reputation, it was necessary that Lord Goring uncharacteristically imply that the fault was his own—Lord Goring, a man, can survive a public blow to his name that Mrs. Cheveley, a woman, would not so easily recover from in a patriarchal society.

‘Our Husband has gone mad again’ by Ola Rotimi is the story of a cocoa farmer turned politician. It is a comedy of manners that clearly shows the idiosyncrasies of Nigerian men and politicians. It reveals a situation in which men that rule the world through their oppressive and power self-allocation have to bow to the dictates of women that learnt to assert their rights, authority and self for political negotiations. Many of the scenes in the play suggest that men make use of women for their end for as long as women continue to agree to be used.

At the end, when women realised that, with their number, they could negotiate and determine the part they play in political outcomes, they asserted themselves and took over political power. Sikira, the former wife of Lejoka-Brown, becomes the new candidate of the party as he (Lejoka-Brown) became discredited as wanting in the requirements of a political leader to lead the party to victory. Madam Ajanaku appeared to have just realised that the political marriage to his daughter was exploitative. Moreover, the other members of the party now acknowledge that Lejoka-Brown’s ways are crude and not likely to be of positive impact on their party’s fortunes at the polls. In addition, the women’s ultimatum requires the party leadership re-strategising in order not to lose the market women’s support. In this way, the women were able to overturn the power balance. Through their new consciousness of the power inherent in their numerical strength, they used strategic

negotiations to upturn the political force to be reckoned with. All of these grew out of the realisation by the women that without the women's votes, the men-controlled parties are vulnerable to their opponents.

Lejoka-Brown abandons politics and laments that before he became caught up in the craziness of politics, he was doing very well running his cocoa business. The running theme in the play may be politics but it also tackles class disparity, gender equality, polygamy and wife inheritance, and the changing roles of women in society.