

# Women in and Beyond the Script: A Dialogue Analysis of *An Ideal Husband*

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## Abstract

The characterization of the female images in *An Ideal Husband* can reflect the social status of women in that era, and imply the author's attitudes toward the different lifestyles of women. This essay is going to use dialogue analysis to find out how these female images are portrayed in the play, and discover the hidden implications about female lives beyond the script.

**Keywords:** literary linguistics, dialogue analysis, an ideal husband

## 1. Introduction

*An Ideal Husband* is a drama script composed by Wilde (2005), one of the most important English writers in the late Victorian age. In the play, a respectable politician Robert Chiltern, who is also considered to be an ideal husband, was blackmailed by this scheming woman Mrs. Cheveley with the evidence of his earlier political crime. This was known by his righteous wife Gertrude, and he was forced to face the crisis of his reputation and his marriage. However, his idly friend Lord Goring helped him out of the trouble by threatening Mrs. Cheveley back with her past crime of stealing, and fixed his relationship with Gertrude. The story ends happily with the promotion of Robert Chiltern, and the engagement of Lord Goring and Robert's sister Mabel.

Notably, the three female characters in the play are significantly different, not only in their personalities, but also in their manners of speech and action. Mrs. Cheveley is intelligent and independent, but behaves viciously by framing others for her own benefits. Gertrude has much nobler values which made her dedicate to social welfares, as well as performing the duty of a good wife. Differently, Mabel is young and innocent, and her primary concern is all about love affairs. This characterization of the female images in the play can reflect the social status of women in that era, and imply the author's attitudes toward the different lifestyles of women. Therefore, this essay is going to use dialogue analysis to find out how these female images are characterized in the play, and discover the hidden implications about female lives beyond the script. In the literature review, it will refer to the earlier studies of Oscar Wilde's attitudes toward the Victorian feminism. Then, the framework of pragmatics analysis in dialogue will be systematically introduced. Afterwards, it will analyze the three characters in detail by applying the framework into some extracts from the script. Finally, it will summarize the analysis result, and discuss the gender implications of the play.

## 2. Literature Review

Oscar Wilde has long been controversial in his stance of the feminist issues. As Kailleen (2004) points out, he is both a proto-feminist writer and misogyny advocator. This awkward contradiction is embodied in his support for female education, and his writings in which women are often the origin of evilness. Stetz (2001) extends this viewpoint by using the word "bi-social", which means Wilde's opinion towards women cannot be explicitly classified into the category of feminism or male chauvinism. It is a combination, or a deviation, because he was acting as an advanced advisor for female education and career in the late Victorians, while he writes against "the smart women" in his books. In addition, Caine (2013) discusses this issue by looking back to his personal experience and the social backgrounds. Under the influence of his mother, who was also working as a respectable author, Oscar Wilde has a clear awareness of the significance of female education. However, his writing still appears a strong stereotype of women being the irrational, and contains sexist implications like men

are more capable and more useful to the society. Thus, by analyzing the characterization of female images in the play, this essay is also aiming to detect the author's real opinion of women.

### 3. Methodology

As the main discourse in a drama script, dialogue can be analyzed with several different approaches: the speech act theory, the politeness strategy, the cooperative principle, and the notion of adjacency pairs. (Cutting, 2005) In the speech act theory, dialogue is viewed as the exchange of clauses, and language, as the medium, sometimes functions as an implied action rather than just delivering the message. For example, when a question is asked, it may act as an offer instead of an inquiry, like "May I help you?" Similarly, in a certain context, a sentence like "the weather is too cold" may be a request to close the window instead of simply a statement. Extended from this, politeness refers to the way the speech is delivered. When a speaker shows the willingness to adjust his own words to seek others' acceptance, it is called the positive face. In contrast, when a speaker shows the wish to be free from imposition, and talk straight forwardly regardless of others' feeling, it is called the negative face. As for the response, the cooperative principle contains four maxims: quality, quantity, relation and manner. Quality refers to the reliability of the statements, quantity means whether it has the appropriate amount of information as the questioner needed, relation is the degree of relevance between the question and answer, and manner means whether the response is clearly explained.

In a broader sense, a dialogue can be broken down into different elements, such as greeting, farewell, question, answer, compliment, or blame. Some of the elements are conventionally bonded together, like "question" and "answer". These are called adjacency pairs. However, sometimes an initiate may lead to different possibilities of response, and in this case they would be classified into two categories according to the human nature: preferred answer and dis-preferred answer. As an illustration, the preferred answer to an invitation is an acceptance, and the dis-preferred answer is a refusal. These approaches constitute the framework of pragmatics analysis in conversation, and will be applied in this essay to investigate how the dialogues characterize the women in the play.

### 4. Analysis

In order to analyze the characteristics of Mrs. Cheveley, Mabel Chiltern and Lady Gertrude, three extracts from the play are selected as sources of their dialogues: the first acquaintance of Robert and Mrs. Cheveley (p. 14), the dialogue between Lord Goring and Mabel (p. 19), and a short conversation between Lord Goring and Gertrude (p. 58). For the convenience of analysis, these dialogues are edited into tables of linguistic database, including the speaker, the function of the speech, and the text of the speech. Note that apart from the surface function of the sentences, such as question or statement, the interpersonal functions are also marked according to the speech act theory, such as compliment, blame, and invitation.

To start the analysis, the cooperative principle can be applied in the dialogue between Robert and Mrs. Cheveley. (See Appendix A) As the host of the party, Robert showed his hospitality in the conversation by friendly inquiries, a few compliments and comments on her topics. In the statistic of the extract, he presented 5 questions, 1 compliment, 1 comment, and 1 apology for asking. As Cutting (2005) suggests, the cooperative responses should be an answer to each question, a thanking to the compliment, and a decent reply for the apology. However, in Mrs. Cheveley's speech, she made 1 obvious avoidance, 5 statements, and 6 denials of his topics. None of Robert's questions are answered. Actually, by denying Robert's speech, she was also avoiding answering these questions properly. As an example, "are you a pessimist or an optimist?" was essentially an "A or B" question, but she answered "neither", which is not an appropriate answer. Similar situations appeared in her sayings like "science can't explain us" for the question "what would the scientists say". This shows that she disobeyed the relation maxim of the cooperative principle, which means the response should be related to the question. It reflects the power relationship between the two characters in the dialogue, which is Mrs. Cheveley higher than Robert, because she refused to answer his questions while he was all the way cooperating with her.

What is more, she has also broken the quantity maxim by giving more information than Robert needed, and making a number of off-topic statements. For example, when Robert praised her for being charming, she replied by saying charms may have a negative influence, and extended this topic by criticizing the female beauties in London. These excessive statements helped her to control the topic, because Robert will follow the cooperative principle by responding properly to her. Moreover, she has also violated the clearness maxim by using vague phrases, such as "I don't know", "I forget", and "sometimes". This created an ambiguous atmosphere, and gave her speech a feeling of uncertainty. It is used to manipulate Robert's mentality, and to leave him an impression of Mrs. Cheveley being mysterious. Therefore, by breaking the rules of the cooperative principle, Mrs. Cheveley managed to avoid answering Robert's questions, control the topics, and leave a mysterious impression of her

personal information. It constructs a power hierarchy in their relationship, and also shows the characteristics of intelligence, ambitiousness and aggressiveness of Mrs. Cheveley.

In spite of her strength, the image of Mrs. Cheveley is rather negative. She is involved in several sins, including deceiving Lord Goring's affections, stealing another lady's bracelet, and blackmailing Robert into a stock exchange swindle. Quoting from the play, Lord Goring evaluated her as "I should fancy Mrs. Cheveley is one of those very modern women of our time who find a new scandal as becoming as a new bonnet, and air them both in the Park every afternoon at five-thirty. I am sure she adores scandals, and that the sorrow of her life at present is that she can't manage to have enough of them." (p. 56) Detecting from this, Mrs. Cheveley is classified into the type of "modern women" who are infamous in their behaviors.

Nevertheless, according to Caine (1997), the society was transforming in the late Victorians, and "the new women" emerged in that era can be viewed as a prototype of modern feminists. These women are distinguished by their willingness of escaping from the family bondage to participate in the social affairs just like men. Mrs. Cheveley can be viewed as a representative for her quality of independence, her capacity of accomplishment, and her background in education, but it is not fair to generalize her defects into the whole group. Also, the image of Mrs. Cheveley is characterized with a strong prejudice of the Victorian feminists, which is impure and aggressive. Evidently, the public hatred to Mrs. Cheveley is on account of her evilness. However, it can also be hypothesized that the male characters hated her because they are also afraid of being defeated by women like her.

Then, the framework of adjacency pairs can be used in analyzing the characteristics of Mabel Chiltern. (See Appendix B) The dialogue between Lord Goring and Mabel happened after he arrived late at the party, and almost the whole conversation is about the lovers' teasing and flirting. Superficially, the two characters seem to be in an equal position, because all the questions and the answers are organized in adjacency pairs. However, according to Sidnell (2013), not every kind of response is expected by the speaker. The preferred response to a blaming should be an apology, whereas Lord Goring's reply to Mabel's blaming is either a deliberate avoidance or a pleasant acceptance. As an illustration, when Mabel accused him of being late, he changed the topic to "have you missed me?", and when Mabel criticized him of being selfish, he accepted it proudly by saying "I am very selfish". Besides, Lord Goring has made a denial instead of an agreement on Mabel's comment "You are always telling me of your bad qualities", which gave him a prevail position in the conversation. All of these responses are dis-preferred answers, and this indicates that Lord Goring is not worried about displeasing Mabel.

Another contrast between their styles of talking appears in their different ways of answering the questions. When Lord Goring asked questions such as "have you missed me?" or "Who brought Mrs. Cheveley here?", Mabel would answer it briefly and explicitly by saying "awfully" or "Lady Markby". It is a preferred answer, because it gives exactly the information the questioner needed. However, when Mabel asked a question, Lord Goring would answer it with various blurry strategies, such as changing the topic ("when I think of them at night I go to sleep at once."), making up an excuse ("I haven't seen her for years, that's all."), or using vague descriptions ("a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!"). These are dis-preferred answers for the vagueness and the limited credibility, and under normal circumstances the questioner would not be satisfied with these answers. However, Mabel's attitude towards Lord Goring is thoroughly positive, and even the blames are flirtier than anger. This suggests that in their relationship, Lord Goring is the one of higher position, and Mabel is the follower who attempts more to please the other.

Quoting from her own words: "Everyone in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all." It can be proved that the love of Mabel towards Lord Goring has eliminated her tempers, and made her wish to strive for their relationship. Reviewing on Lord Goring, he seems to care much less about this love affair, and all his contributions such as proposal were conducted in a casual way. In the plots of the whole play, Mrs. Cheveley has an evil personality, Gertrude is stubborn in her attitude towards mistakes, and Mabel seems to be the only female character with no flaw. She is innocent, lively, and brave for love. It seems that she is a role model the author sets for the female audience.

Nevertheless, according to Walsh (2001), in a masculine concept, women tend to subordinate themselves to their men. In other words, women would be submissive and sacrifice themselves to men to fulfill their male chauvinism. Mabel's love of "no character left" is a typical self-subordination. Although she is an educated woman with fashionable thoughts, her main virtues like purity and submissiveness are still the conventional demands of women. This phenomenon derives from the concept that men are of more importance than women, and reflects the proposition of sexual inequality. Therefore, the image of Mabel does not simply represent an

innocent girl, but also implies the author's idealization of women from a masculine perspective.

Finally, the politeness strategy can be applied to analyze the conversation between Lord Goring and Gertrude, namely Lady Chiltern. (See Appendix C) Unlike Mabel, Gertrude here presented a transformation from the positive face to the negative face because of Lord Goring's inappropriate speech. (Paltridge, 2012) At first, she showed her hospitality by greeting to him and inviting him to have some tea. Yet after Lord Goring made fun of her social affairs with comparisons to bonnets, she was annoyed and showed her dislike with the two times of denials. The exclamation mark in the end intensified her speech, and put emphasis in her strong negative face. This suggests that the two characters are in an equal position, in which happiness and angers can both be freely expressed. It also indicates that the characteristics of Gertrude, which is kind and friendly, but sometimes fractious because of her own beliefs and principles.

In addition, it is worth noticing that even when she was already irritated by Lord Goring, she was still answering his questions about her work. This shows her good breeding as a lady, and also her respect for this man. Meanwhile, during the conversation with Lord Goring, she kept in mind to give a compliment to her husband. ("By the way, Robert, your name was received with loud applause.") This reveals the distinction between Mrs. Cheveley and her. Although they are both active in participating in political affairs, she is still being modest to men and paying much attention to her husband, while Mrs. Cheveley is arrogant and aggressive to all the men.

What is more, in the last act, after Robert refused the proposal, she was convinced by Lord Goring's speech: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, and 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." (p. 136). It is a typical sexist statement, which suggests the life of a man is of more importance than a woman. It restricts the value of women in the domestic world, and implies the duty of women is to serve men well. However, Gertrude has agreed with him. She repeated these words to Robert and changed his minds of quitting. This reveals that no matter how "modern" she seems, she is still a conservative woman with values from the masculine world.

As Vicinus (2013) argues, in the Victorian age, the social norm of an English lady is to be pure and gentle, and dedicate the whole life to domestic affairs, such as serving the husband and taking care of the children. Gertrude has extended her sphere of activity to social and political affairs, but still has not reached a real independent state. Instead, she kept the "virtues" of the Victorian women, and performing her duty as a perfect wife more than an independent person. As the main positive figure in the play, Gertrude seems to represent the author's standard of an ideal wife, who is well-educated and well-mannered, but still obedient to her husband.

## 5. Discussion

Through the analysis of the three female characters, their personalities are depicted from the play. Mrs. Cheveley, on the one hand, is intelligent, ambitious, and independent in her characteristics. On the other hand, she is aggressive in her personality and vicious in her actions of harming other people. Mabel Chiltern is young, lively and innocent. She loves her man so much that she eliminates her temper, forgets her disappointments, and even loses her own character. Lady Chiltern, namely Gertrude, is a perfect wife. She is active in social affairs, dedicates to her marriage, and puts herself in a lower position compared to her husband.

According to Simpson (2004), the effect of dialogue in the play can be divided into two levels: what one character says to another character, and what the author says to the audience. The author's views are implied in the dialogues, and by analyzing the dialogues, readers can detect the hidden meanings beyond the script. The three female characters in the play can be classified into two types according to their personality: the evil woman (Mrs. Cheveley), and the fine women (Mabel & Gertrude). Compared between the two groups, it can be discovered that the major difference between the two types, except the crimes, is whether they are submissive to men. This character design reveals the preference of the author, and indicates his proposition of female subordination.

In the meantime, detecting from his attitude towards Gertrude, it can be explained that actually the author does not oppose to the idea of women getting involved in political affairs. However, he believes that female participation in politics should not influence the masculine power, and a man's life is more valuable than a woman's. He considers female education as a positive method, as long as the women are still obedient to the men. This is corresponding to the previous studies on Wilde's stance in the female issues, in which he is open-minded in the public policies and sexist in the gender relations. To sum up, he advocates female education and female participation in social affairs, but rejects the idea of women getting independent from men and attaining real personal value.

## 6. Conclusion

This essay has used dialogue analysis to explain the characterization of the three female images in *An Ideal Husband*, and discovered the hidden implications of women in the play. In the literature review, it referred to the previous studies of Oscar Wilde and feminism, and introduced the contradictory stance of Wilde in the female issues. Then, it explained the methodology of the dialogue analysis, including the speech act theory, the cooperative principle, the adjacency pairs, and the politeness strategy. Afterwards, it applied the framework into three extracts from the play, and discovered the different personalities of the three female characters.

Mrs. Cheveley, as a representative of “the new women”, is ambitious, independent and aggressive. Mabel Chiltern, as the idealization of the female image, is innocent and obedient to love. Gertrude, as an illustration of the perfect wife, is both active in political participation and dedicate to her marriage. Finally, it made a comparison among the characters, detected the preference of the author, and found out the gender implications of the play. Wilde’s opinions suggest that it is good for a woman to be educated and get involved in public life, but it is dangerous to let them be truly independent and compete with men. This reveals the concept of sexual inequality in *An Ideal Husband*, and shows the limitations of Oscar Wilde’s gender ideology.

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## Appendix A

SPEAKER	FUNCTION	SPEECH
Sir Robert Chiltern	Question	And what prizes did you get, Mrs. Cheveley?
Mrs. Cheveley	Avoidance	My prizes came a little later on in life.
	Denial	I don't think any of them were for good conduct. I forget.
Sir Robert Chiltern	Compliment	I am sure they were for something charming!
Mrs. Cheveley	Denial	I don't know that women are always rewarded for being charming. I think they are usually punished for it!
	Statement	Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London!
Sir Robert Chiltern	Comment	What an appalling philosophy that sounds!
	Apology	To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be impertinence.
	Question	But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.
Mrs. Cheveley	Denial	Oh, I'm neither.
	Statement	Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

<b>Sir Robert Chiltern</b>	Question	You prefer to be natural?
<b>Mrs. Cheveley</b>	Denial	Sometimes
	Statement	But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.
<b>Sir Robert Chiltern</b>	Question	What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?
<b>Mrs. Cheveley</b>	Denial	Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us.
	Statement	Men can be analyzed, women... merely adored.
<b>Sir Robert Chiltern</b>	Question	You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?
<b>Mrs. Cheveley</b>	Denial	Science can never grapple with the irrational.
	Statement	That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

## Appendix B

<b>SPEAKER</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>	<b>SPEECH</b>
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Blame	You are very late!
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Question	Have you missed me?
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Answer	Awfully!
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Comment	Then I am sorry I did not stay away longer. I like being missed.
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Blame	How very selfish of you!
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Agreement	I am very selfish.
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Comment	You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Denial	I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Question	Are the others very bad?
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Answer	Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once.
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Comment	Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Compliment	How very nice of you! But then you are always nice.
	Question	By the way, I want to ask you a question, Miss Mabel. Who brought Mrs. Cheveley here? That woman in heliotrope, who has just gone out of the room with your brother?
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Answer	Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her.
	Question	Why do you ask?
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Answer	I haven't seen her for years, that is all.
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Comment	What an absurd reason!
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Statement	All reasons are absurd.
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Question	What sort of a woman is she?
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Answer	Oh! A genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!
<b>Mabel Chiltern</b>	Comment	I dislike her already.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Compliment	That shows your admirable good taste.

## Appendix C

<b>SPEAKER</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>	<b>SPEECH</b>
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Greeting	Good afternoon, Lord Goring!
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Greeting	Good afternoon, Lady Chiltern!
	Question	Have you been in the Park?
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Answer	No; I have just come from the Woman's Liberal Association
	(towards another addressee)	where, by the way, Robert, your name was received with loud applause
	Invitation	And now I have come in to have my tea. You will wait and have some tea, won't you?
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Acceptance	I'll wait for a short time, thanks.
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Notice	I will be back in a moment. I am only going to take my hat off.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Request	Oh! Please don't.
	Compliment	It is so pretty. One of the prettiest hats I ever saw. I hope the Woman's Liberal Association received it with loud applause.
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Denial	We have much more important work to do than look at each other's bonnets, Lord Goring.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Question	Really? What sort of work?
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Answer	Oh! dull, useful, delightful things, Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise....
	Statement	Everything, in fact, that you would find thoroughly uninteresting.
<b>Lord Goring</b>	Question	And never bonnets?
<b>Lady Chiltern</b>	Answer	Never bonnets, never!
	(Denial)	

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