

“An Ideal Husband” by Oscar Wilde

Sometimes, “making a judgment” and “making an assumption” are used interchangeably. But assuming something is to consider the thing true without proof, and judging something means to weigh evidences presented to determine a conclusion. We should be making judgments constantly, but we should assume very little, and only after having judged properly.

Sir Robert Chiltern is “assumed” in this play as being the outstanding citizen. One might argue that he was judged to be an outstanding citizen based on a critique of his actions, but the problem lies with assuming the false premise that “good men will always do good things.” Good men will do good things many times, but they will also do bad things because of the sin that so easily besets us. (Hebrews 12:1)

Good deeds don’t make someone good. Goodness comes from a state of heart, which is constantly battling temptations and mistakes along the journey. Lord Goring understands this fact, aptly pointing out that “no one is incapable of doing a foolish or wrong thing.” But by all external accounts, he is the most unlikely candidate for giving moral advice. At the onset, he seems to pride himself on being morally bankrupt. His friends even poke fun at him, not only for being the way he is, but for trying to offer any advice or insight to things “of which he knows so little” according to Lady Chiltern. But every so often, Lord Goring’s mask of shallowness lifts, revealing much more than meets the eye.

As you watch this production, consider the following questions: what constitutes morality? Is striving for goodness worth the fight? Should we strive for doing good deeds at all, or will goodness come naturally from striving for something more? What might that “more” be? What assumptions do you make about others? What assumptions have people made about you? What false premises do the characters of this play hold that, if denounced, would have changed their courses of action?

INTERMISSION

Everyone has a code of conduct – whether or not they consider themselves to be “religious.” The origin of that code is ultimately the source of that person’s final authority – whether that is self, another person, God, or an institution. The problem is that there are so many moral codes that exist, and that means moral codes will clash eventually. Moral codes constantly change because of this. You see it in government with constitutional amendments, congressional bills, federal orders, and court appeals. You see it in people changing their minds about after they experience something. You see it when teachers and professors favor some students over others. Double standards abound, and there is little that remains immune to vacillation.

There is one assumption worth making in life: “you are not perfect.” If you assume that, you also have to assume that not only will you desire others to be patient with you concerning your imperfections, but your own code of conduct might not be perfect either. It might be wrong altogether, or it might lack some important components that would make it complete.

All the morality in the world means nothing without patience, forgiveness, and love to help each other along passed our human natures. (Jeremiah 17:9) We should always strive for character growth, as a race we are always running, always keeping in mind where we have been so that we can aid others who might not be quite as good at it. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). It might take years for people to understand what to do or how to think, but they can’t reach the realization any faster if the rest of us, who were blessed with the understanding first, “condemn them to sterile failure,” as Lord Goring observes. Instead, “above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.” 1 Peter 4:8

A Historical Note

FROM THE DIRECTOR: Oscar Wilde was ahead of his time on many social issues, including the role of women in society. Besides his own social involvement, one of the ways he fought for gender equality was through satire. In his plays, he constantly mocks the arbitrary standards that were imposed upon the two sexes during his time, and he showed that by bucking against them, deeper relationships and greater meaning in life is possible.

As we prepared for this show, there was confusion about one section of the text in light of women's rights. Near the climax of the play, as Lord Goring is encouraging Lady Chiltern to forgive her husband, he says, "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." If read in a vacuum, the line seems insulting. However, in its context and Oscar Wilde's own views, it seems as if the modern eye often reads the line through a tainted lens.

Lord Goring is speaking about a man's view in his OWN eyes – not objectively. He is saying that men hold themselves in higher regard than women hold themselves. A man's life is of more value to himself in his own eyes, due to his far-reaching determinations that are intrinsic to a man's psychology. Lord Goring's quote is buried amidst a large paragraph in which he explains to Lady Chiltern that she has tremendous power as a woman and as her husband's wife. When Lord Goring says that a woman's life revolves around curves of emotion, he is appealing to the power she has to regard all aspects of a relationship – something that a man can't do as easily, because he is too taken up with intellect – intellect meaning a rational explanation for something as inexplicable as love, not "education" or "ability to reason." This play tears down pietism and legalism – things his era embraced all too much – and replaces it with love, patience, and self-sacrifice, all of which can't be explained by a rule book or the hard sciences.

As I've explained this interpretation to my cast as well as a few curious audience-members-to-be, most men I explained it to would nod and say "That makes perfect sense!" whereas most women would raise their eyebrows in confusion. Those responses were interesting to me in light of today's feminism. Many women today often bristle against the idea that men and women view the world and others differently based on their intrinsic differences, labeling that philosophy as one of the obstacles against true gender equality. But in the meantime, many men can identify with Oscar Wilde's observation about themselves and what they lack that only a woman can provide. Understanding and embracing differences is true teamwork. It is what strong marriages are made of. It is what strong friendships are made of. It is, in the end, the only way there can be equality between men and women in any other area of life.