

An introduction to *Lady Windermere's Fan*

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Andrew Dickson explores some of complexities of Oscar Wilde's first hit play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

[Oscar Wilde's](#) first hit play, [Lady Windermere's Fan](#) (1892), is a hectic upper-class comedy, in which the tangled complexities of the plot are rivalled only by Wilde's sparkling and witty dialogue. Relating an enjoyably unlikely story of a wife who suspects her husband of having an affair, only for the 'other woman' to be unmasked as her own mother, the drama was a hit on the London West End stage, and made Wilde rich. But despite its diamond-sharp one-liners, there is more to *Lady Windermere's Fan* than mere entertainment: it is above all a subtle social satire, particularly pointed about the hypocrisy of Victorian attitudes to women and sex. Its meticulous construction and deft balance between comedy and seriousness point the way towards Wilde's later scripts [An Ideal Husband](#) and [The Importance of Being Earnest](#), perhaps his masterworks.

The background to the play

By the early 1890s, it looked as if Wilde – then in his late 30s – might never have a successful career as a dramatist. Born in Dublin in 1854 and educated at the University of Oxford, Wilde spent his 20s as a freelance poet, lecturer, critic, and well-dressed man about town, yearning all the time to be taken seriously as a playwright. His first play, a tragedy called [Vera](#) (1881), failed when it was produced in New York; his second, a dour historical work in Shakespearian verse called *The Duchess of Padua*, was rejected by the actress who commissioned it. Despite receiving attention for his essays, and causing a scandalous success with his novel [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#) (1890) – there were calls for the work to be burnt because of its homosexual themes – it looked likely that theatrical success would elude him.

Eventually Wilde was persuaded to try his hand at comedy. He was interested by contemporary French drama, where plays full of social intrigues and unlikely plot twists were all the rage, and also read the wildly funny comedies of English dramatists of the late 1600s. Revealingly, he was also fascinated by the pioneering experiments in realist social drama being made by the contemporary Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, and realised that – with a bit of work – some of Ibsen's darkest themes could also work in a funnier key. Wilde began work on the script during a summer visit in 1891 to the Lake District of northern England, which gave him many of the names in the play (Lake Windermere was nearby, while another character is named after the town of Darlington in County Durham). He continued refining the script through the rest of that year, sharpening its dialogue and polishing the plot.

When *Lady Windermere's Fan* went on stage at the St James's Theatre in London the following February, the reviews were positive – one newspaper proclaimed that 'Mr Oscar Wilde is nothing unless brilliant and witty' – and audiences rushed to see it. Wilde had finally won the success he craved.

Synopsis

Set over four acts that occupy a 24-hour period, the play begins in the drawing room of the grand London residence of the young and apparently loving couple Lord and Lady Windermere. Lady Windermere's preparations for her 21st birthday ball are abruptly ruined by the revelation that her husband has been seen visiting a beautiful, mysterious older woman, Mrs Erylne, and giving

her money. Lady Windermere is appalled and does her best to find out the truth. Her husband denies that he is having an affair.

The second act is set that same evening. Both Lady Windermere and her guests are astonished when Mrs Erlynne appears at the ball; even worse, it appears that Lord Windermere has invited her. Humiliated, Lady Windermere decides that she will leave her husband for another lover, Lord Darlington. Mrs Erlynne, meanwhile, seems determined to marry one of her rich society friends – with financial assistance, naturally, from Lord Windermere.

Act 3 takes place at Lord Darlington's house, where Lady Windermere has fled. She debates whether to return to her husband, only to be confronted yet again by Mrs Erlynne, who insists she must. When Lord Windermere unexpectedly arrives, Lady Windermere hides, leaving her fan on the table by mistake. Mrs Erlynne kindly covers up for her and pretends that Lady Windermere has never been there.

In the final act, the truth is uncovered – or at least some of it is. It transpires that Mrs Erlynne is in fact Lady Windermere's mother, who abandoned her as a child and left with another man, ruining her reputation. Twenty years later, she has reappeared under an assumed name, and proceeds to blackmail Lord Windermere, threatening to reveal that she is not in fact dead (as Lady Windermere has always believed), and thus bring shame upon the household.

Yet, when this is all revealed to the assembled cast, Lady Windermere is out of the room, and her husband decides to keep the secret from her so as to preserve the happiness of their marriage. Likewise, she decides not to admit that she was on the point of leaving him. Mrs Erlynne cheerfully departs for overseas, leaving numerous mysteries and secrets behind her.

'A play about a good woman'

Lady Windermere's Fan seems at first glance like little more than a wonderfully enjoyable comedy, filled with characters who spend most of their time trading witty remarks. Many of its best lines have gone down in history: the lovelorn Lord Darlington's 'we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars' must be one of the most quoted phrases Wilde ever wrote, closely followed by his declaration that 'I can resist anything anything except temptation'. A line Wilde wrote in *Vera* – 'life is too important a thing ever to talk seriously about' – also seems to describe *Lady Windermere's Fan*, particularly when you try to make sense of its far-fetched plot (as one early review put it, 'there are many obvious improbabilities in this fable').

Yet the play is far more radical than it first appears. Written only two years after the British premiere of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which provoked huge controversy for a plot in which a woman leaves her husband and children to lead an independent life, *Lady Windermere's Fan* experiments with remarkably similar themes, only in the guise of comic satire rather than anguished melodrama. Subtitled 'a play about a good woman', it imagines what might happen if Ibsen's heroine was English rather than Norwegian, and if she suddenly reappeared on the scene 20 years on, just as her daughter is trying to assert her position in fashionable London society. Like much of Wilde's best work, the play balances themes that are faintly absurd and also entirely serious.

Sexual politics and secrets

The Irish-born Wilde always had a sharp eye for the double standards of the English upper classes, particularly their attitudes to 'respectability' and virtue between the sexes, which permitted many men to behave exactly as they wanted (as long as their escapades took place behind closed doors), while condemning women as 'fallen' if they dared to step outside the bounds of conventional life or marriage. Most of his audiences would have expected Mrs Erlynne to be a tragic character desperate to escape the shadows of her past; instead, she is essentially

the heroine of the piece, and gloriously quick-witted too ('Ideals are dangerous things,' she tells her daughter at one point, 'Realities are better'). In this she looks intriguingly like a version of Wilde himself, particularly when you reflect that, like Mrs Erlynne, he too had secrets about his love life: three years after *Lady Windermere's Fan* was produced, he was put on trial for having a relationship with a younger man and sentenced to two years in prison. He died in exile and poverty in Paris a few years later.

Despite Wilde's early reputation as part of the so-called '[Aesthetic movement](#)', which insisted that art should be free from social responsibilities (their rallying cry was 'art for art's sake'), *Lady Windermere's Fan* manages to be sharply observant about upper-class English society. It is all the funnier for so being so mercilessly precise about the world it mocks, and genuinely mischievous in its hint that the secret to a happy marriage is for both partners to keep secrets from one another.

In the comedies that followed, Wilde exploited these themes to the full: [An Ideal Husband](#) teasingly suggests that supposedly 'ideal' men are sometimes anything but, while [The Importance of Being Earnest](#) (a 'trivial play for serious people') satirises the playboy antics and double lives of London bachelors. Wilde's greatest achievement may have been in getting his wealthy, well-dressed and fashionable audiences to laugh at themselves – without them realising that they were the butt of the joke.