

Teachers' Notes

This study guide is aimed at students of English and Media Studies GCSE and A level. It looks at how and why Oscar Wilde's 'An Ideal Husband' has been adapted from stage play to screen production. Areas of focus are: themes, character, location, costume and language.

Film Synopsis

Devoted womaniser and tireless party-goer Lord Arthur Goring (Rupert Everett) is famed throughout London for his elegance, repartee and refusal to take anything seriously. However, when called upon by his life-long friend Sir Robert Chiltern (Jeremy Northam) to resolve an unusually delicate matter, Arthur instantly rises to the occasion.

Sir Robert is a man who has everything. A brilliant politician and a perfect gentleman, he is the ideal husband for the captivating Lady Chiltern (Cate Blanchett). Admired by all, they present a picture of wedded harmony until the scheming adventuress Mrs Chevelly (Julianne Moore) threatens to reveal a dark secret from his past and the very foundations of Sir Robert's career and marriage look set to crumble. Cornered, he turns to Arthur.

Lord Goring soon finds himself caught up in a tangled web of lies, temptations, and trysts. While he excels at manipulating the affairs of others, his own prove infinitely more challenging. The persistent charms of Sir Robert's sister Mabel Chiltern (Minnie Driver) and the constant badgering of his own father Lord Caversham (John Wood) pose a significant threat to Arthur's blissful bachelorhood.

Director: Oliver Parker
UK release date: April 16, 1999
Certificate: PG

Adapting 'An Ideal Husband' for the Modern Screen

Although it is now over a hundred years since Oscar Wilde's play 'An Ideal Husband' was first performed on the stage it is still as popular with audiences today as it ever was. Oliver Parker's film adaptation of 'An Ideal Husband' is set in 1895, the original year in which the play was performed and retains the language, costumes and setting of the period. However, there are many ways in which it has been adapted to make it suitable for screen rather than theatre production and also to make it attractive to modern audience.

task 1

Before we start to look at each of these areas of change in detail, discuss with a partner the differences we find between reading the play version of a text, seeing a production in the theatre and watching a film at the cinema. Set out your thoughts in a grid as shown below.

Cinema	Theatre	Text
You can get much closer to the action		
	Each performance is slightly different	
		You can re-read if you do not understand

task 2

Compare your list with other pairs in the group and add to it if you wish. Compile a list of the ten most important things to think about when adapting a play text for the screen. For example, making the language clear is important because you can only hear something once in the cinema.

Why adapt 'An Ideal Husband'?

Before we go any further with our examination of how 'An Ideal Husband' has been adapted for the screen, it is important that we stop to think why. Oscar Wilde's play is part of what we call 'classic literature' by which we mean novels, plays and poetry which address issues relevant to any member of the human race no matter at what time in history they are reading the text or what circumstances they are in.

The story of 'An Ideal Husband' is that of the Chilterns facing the problem of Sir Robert's mistake in the past and of the relationship between Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern. Although this particular tale is set in the 1890s, the ideas and issues it raises – of whether we expect too much of those we love, of whether any person or any marriage is 'ideal', of whether public figures can and should have a private life and our expectations of them – are as important to us today as they were a century ago.

task 3

What expectations do we have of an ideal husband or wife? Write an advertisement for yours. Is your ideal husband or wife the same as they would have been in Wilde's time? Does our modern perspective influence our opinion of Gertrude Chiltern's beliefs and behaviour?

task 4

What expectations do we have of the public figures who influence our way of life? Write a list of ten qualities they should have. Compare your list with someone else's in the group. Work together to place these in order of priority and explain your decisions. How does your list compare with your requirements for an ideal partner?

task 5

In the screen adaptation of 'An Ideal Husband' there is no mention of the stolen bracelet which forces Mrs Cheveley to think again in the play text. (The coincidence of this was a typical feature of Victorian theatre.) How does this omission serve to heighten the themes of the play and perhaps make it appeal to a modern audience?

Scandal

Wilde's story of a man forced to come to terms with the errors of the past and the possible consequences upon both his public and private life is one with which we can see many modern parallels. Newspapers, in particular the broadsheet press, are full of stories about the private lives of public figures. Some of these will be people such as politicians who have been elected and paid to represent the lives of many; some will be media personalities such as pop stars and actors who are famous because of their art.

The information revealed about their private lives may be trivial and of interest only in terms of gossip or it may indeed be more significant in that it offends our social and moral code and could have an effect on the lives of many. The distinction between the two is not always clear. Indeed, the death of Princess Diana highlighted the ever-present debate as to exactly what should be public knowledge about those with power and influence, how far the press should have access to this information and the means by which they obtain it.

task 1

Collect articles from the press revealing information about the private lives of public figures. Which articles and pictures do you feel may have an influence on the lives of others? Are there any which you feel are unnecessarily intrusive?

task 2

What are the most famous scandals of recent years? What scandals from history can you think of? Does the subject matter of scandal stay the same or change over the years?

task 3

Read the following extract from an article in which Oscar Wilde expresses his opinion of the press:

“In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press... The fact is that the public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing. Journalism, conscious of this, and having tradesmanlike habits, supplies their demands... The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all.”

Extract from Oscar Wilde's essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', published in 1891 for the fortnightly review.

Do you agree with Wilde's comments? From what you know of Wilde's life (see Appendix I) why do you think he feels so strongly about the press?

Casting for a Modern Audience

One of the major factors in attracting an audience to see a film is the stars that are in it. This is why the stars' faces are often used in promotional material and their names always appear in sizeable graphics. Choosing the most appropriate stars for a film (always assuming they are willing and available to be in the film) can also help the audience to understand character. In a book and in some plays, detailed descriptions of character can be given, but there is no way of doing this in a film. It is up to the actor or actress to establish character quickly.

One way in which a director can help the audience is to cast actors or actresses who carry certain associations with them because of the types of character they usually play or genres they are associated with. However, it is also important for the cast to bring a fresh look to the film. Oliver Parker wanted to give his adaptation “a youthfulness and sexuality” and so the production was cast with actors and actresses younger than are often associated with this play.

Read through the detailed descriptions of characters that Oscar Wilde provides in the play text of ‘An Ideal Husband’.

Sir Robert Chiltern (Jeremy Northam)

A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A personality of mark. Not popular – few personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note of his manner is that of perfect distinction, and a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power.

There is a nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyke would have liked to have painted his head.

Mrs Cheveley (Julianne Moore)

... is tall and rather slight. Lips very thin and highly-coloured, a line of scarlet on a pallid face. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, and long throat. Rouge accentuated the natural paleness of her complexion. Gray-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful. A work of art, on the whole, but one showing the influence of too many schools.

Lady Chiltern (Cate Blanchett)

... a woman of grave Greek beauty, about twenty-seven years of age.

Lord Goring (Rupert Everett)

Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a point of vantage.

Miss Mabel Chiltern (Minnie Driver)

... is the perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type. She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower. There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair, and the little mouth, with its parted lips, is expectant, like the mouth of a child. She has all the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence. But she is really like a Tangara statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so.

Extracts from the character descriptions from the New Mermaids edition of 'An Ideal Husband', edited by Russell Jackson (1996).

task 1

Oscar Wilde often does not just describe what his characters look like but gives us an idea of their personality. Look at the language and imagery which Wilde uses to describe his characters. How does this affect what we feel about them before they even take part in the action?

task 2

What qualities do we associate with the actors cast in the film from previous roles? Do we associate them with particular genres? Why do you think Oliver Parker chose these people? How do they compare with Wilde's descriptions from the text?

Location

The setting in a production for theatre and for film presents many different challenges. Generally speaking, the setting plays a more active role in cinema than in most theatrical styles.

Nowadays we take set detail for granted but in the early years of cinema this was one of the features which audiences found truly amazing. Film is a medium in which the visual is extremely important. As experienced cinema-goers automatically expect a modern film to keep us entertained by showing us a variety of different settings. These may be specially constructed studio sets or they may be carefully chosen locations which can be then adapted further to create exactly the desired effect. Location can be used to give us clues about the society we are observing; what people do on a day-to-day basis, their

financial status, interests and concerns – all this in a short space of time. Location is especially useful when trying to convey what life was like a century ago to a modern cinema audience.

task 1

Look at the programme for a stage production of ‘An Ideal Husband’.. How many sets were used and what were they?

task 2

Make a list of the locations you remember from the film. Try to say how each of the locations helps to build a picture of Wilde’s society in the 1890s. Be as detailed as you can in your answers.

task 3

You have been asked to re-create a street scene for a film to be based in 1895. Assuming that you have found a location where the houses look of the period, what elements of the modern world would you need to eradicate?

Settings

The locations in which we meet the major players in ‘An Ideal Husband’ have been carefully constructed to reflect the types of character they are.

Lord Arthur Goring’s Apartment

The first and biggest set designed by Michael Howells was Lord Arthur Goring’s apartment. This bachelor pad, with its strong oriental overtones, was recreated with a large proportion of original furniture, furnishings and objets d’art.

“In contrast to the Chilterns’, Arthur is ‘old money’ and more avant-garde... in his outside appearance and clothes he’s the perfect English gentleman, but in fact there’s something more interesting about him, a bit darker...”

Goring’s apartment is ‘his domain; a place he can retire to... but also have decadent parties.’ There was serious money spent on the apartment to show his wealth.”

Michael Howells, set designer

The Chilterns’ House

Much of the action in ‘An Ideal Husband’ takes place at the house of Sir Robert and Lady Gertrude Chiltern. Michael Howells explains that

“The idea was that the Chilterns are ‘new money’ so they bought old style. They bought the 1850s, Napoleon III look. Theirs is a much safer style than Arthur’s apartment.”

- What do you understand by the term ‘new money’?
- Why is the Chilterns’ money ‘new’?
- In what ways is the look of their house ‘old style’?
- How does it help to identify their social standing? Be as specific as you can in your answer.
- What similarities and differences can you see with Lord Goring’s apartment?

task 4

You are the production designer for a film of 'An Ideal Husband' set in the present day. Design an apartment for Lord Goring which reflects his personality.

task 5

Design two rooms from the Chilterns' house for your film of 'An Ideal Husband' set in the present day. As with Lord Goring, they should reflect the personality of their inhabitants and give us clues as to lifestyle and social standing.

Revealing Character

Costume

In the theatre of the 1890s, when Wilde's play was first performed, there was great interest in the fashions of the stage in the same way that we might be interested in fashion on film or television today. Many women's magazines of the time, and newspapers too, carried illustrated articles on the costume of current stage productions and 'An Ideal Husband' was no exception. Costume as an aspect of *mise en scène* (a French term used in the film world to explain what is put into the frame and why) can also be used to give us information about character and this can apply every bit as much to theatre as it does to film.

The 1895 production of 'An Ideal Husband' caused much comment in the press with regard to the costumes of the female characters. If you look at the illustrations below you can see a selection of the dresses of Mrs Cheveley, Lady Chiltern and Mabel Chiltern. Mrs Cheveley's Act 1 evening gown caused a great deal of commotion because it was of emerald green satin decorated with dead swallows. There was great outrage at the time as indeed there would be today about using dead animals for decoration. The popular *Queen* magazine reminded its readers that:

"We have seen bird worn on this stage before as an insignia of vice, and when we noted that an entire flight of swallows have been disposed upon the newcomer's costume, we have little doubt of the lady's character."

Queen, January 12, 1895

In this way we understand that the audience of the time would immediately recognise the code of Mrs Cheveley as villainess. In the opinion of this magazine, Lady Chiltern is made seem a more appealing and less strict character by dressing her in some off-the-shoulder gowns. In the same way, Mabel Chiltern is dressed in a less elaborate fashion than the other women in the play and this indicated her youth and forthrightness.

Drawings of dresses sketched in 'An Ideal Husband' played at the Haymarket Theatre in 1895



Film stills from Oliver Parker's 1999 screen adaptation



Three photographs from 'The Sketch', a newspaper of 1895, showing characters from the first performances of 'An Ideal Husband'.



MISS MABEL CHILTERN © THE SKETCH FEB 13, 1895



LORD GORING © THE SKETCH FEB 13, 1895



SIR ROBERT AND LADY CHILTERN © THE SKETCH FEB 13, 1895

task 1

- In what ways do the costume, hair and make-up of the characters give us clues as to their personality and their role within the film – for example: villain, love interest etc.
- Compare the drawings and photographs of actual dresses from the period with the stills from the film. Which do you prefer? What changes to costume have been made to make the film appealing to a modern audience? You may also like to consider the hairstyles and make-up for the women in the film and say whether you think these have been adapted for a modern audience.
- How has colour been used within the settings and costumes of the film to reveal character?

Body Language and Facial Expression

Acting in theatre and acting in film present quite different challenges and require a different set of skills. Acting in the theatre is largely dictated by the fact that there is a considerable physical distance between the actors and the audience. To compensate for this expressions and actions must be exaggerated to some extent and yet not so much as to appear ridiculous. On a film set, the camera is often very close to the actors and actresses and as such a more natural style of acting is needed. This means that facial movements need to be small, as they are in real life, and expressions need to be subtle. Likewise, body movements need to be as close as they can be to what we experience in real life and the voice needs to be carefully modulated.

When early actors appeared on film for the first time they had to adjust to this new style of acting and this is why the acting often appears unnatural to us as a modern audience. However, we must remember that in the early days of cinema there was no soundtrack or dialogue so that movement had to be exaggerated to get the story across, but also that the camera was fixed on a tripod in one position at a distance from the actors and so watching a film was much the same as going to the theatre.

In a modern film the camera is much more flexible than it was in the early days of cinema. We are able to experience the action taking place from a variety of different distances and angles, rather than seeing it from the fixed position of out seat within the theatre audience. In this way our attention can be drawn towards a certain action or object or we can be made aware of the expression on someone's face. We are

also aware of certain conventions of camera work such as long shot being used to establish location or a close-up being used to express emotion.

task 2

- What emotion or event is being expressed by each image in the film stills and ‘The Sketch’ photographs? Describe in as much detail as you can how the body language displayed in each of the images is related to theatre or cinema style.
- Look at each of the theatre images in turn and explain what shots you would use to show the emotion on film. Then consider how you would use body language and facial expression to show the event/emotion in the theatre. (You may use the very dramatic style displayed in the theatre stills in this section to do this exercise.)

Adapting the Language for the Modern Screen

“You’ve got this extraordinarily stylised language which has to work on screen.”

Oliver Parker, Director

When Oliver Parker adapted Wilde’s play text for the screen he realised that he would have to make changes to the language. As we mentioned earlier, with a written text we can always go back and re-read something that we have forgotten or do not understand. In the theatre our attention is focused to a greater extent on what is being spoken and we enjoy listening to the way in which Wilde plays with the language to create a certain effect. In the cinema, however, the picture on screen is the most influential element and so the language needs to be clearly understood. Language which has been written for the stage, especially if it is the language of a century ago, can sound too long-winded and overly complicated for the more natural style of film. Oliver Parker was concerned to keep “... the opulence of Wilde’s language while reducing the complexity of the sentences and making the dialogue as naturalistic as possible...”

task 1

Read the extract from the screenplay of ‘An Ideal Husband’ (Appendix II). Explain in your own words what you understand Oliver Parker means by the “opulence” of Wilde’s language. Find examples of this from the play text.

task 2

Compare the screenplay to the original play text. Underline the text that Oliver Parker has chosen to keep in the screenplay and explain why you think this decision was made.

task 3

“I did a lot of Wilde and Shaw in the theatre but what is difficult about the lines is making it sound like you’ve just thought of them.”

Rupert Everett (Lord Arthur Goring)

What is it in particular about Wilde’s language that makes it ‘difficult to sound like you’ve just thought of it’? Re-write a section of dialogue from the play text of ‘An Ideal Husband’ attempting to make the language sound more naturalistic to the modern ear.

Appendix I

The Life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 to wealthy and well-connected parents. Educated at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and Trinity College, Dublin, in 1875 he won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he soon acquired a reputation for wit, charm and conversational ease and went on to gain a first class degree.

On leaving university the young Oscar travelled briefly before settling in London, where he established himself amongst fashionable circles as a poet, art critic, and journalist. Invited to all the right parties and first nights, he became famed for his 'dandy' dress, wearing velvet coats, knee-breeches, and cravats. He proclaimed himself an aesthete, a popular movement of the time which believed in beauty and greater awareness of it through the eyes of the artistic world.

In May 1884 he married Constance Lloyd and their two sons Cyril and Vyvyan were born in quick succession. Wilde worked hard as a journalist to support his family, for a while taking over the editorship of the popular magazine *Woman's World*.

It was 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' which first brought Oscar Wilde both critical praise and unwanted public attention. First published as a novel in 1891 it was immediately banned by several booksellers, including WH Smith, who labelled it "indecent filth". That same year he met the young, aristocratic Lord Alfred Douglas, who was still a student at Oxford. Wilde was by this time a practising homosexual and his marriage was under some strain. He started a friendship with Douglas and they became lovers. In the meantime, Wilde's first play 'The Duchess of Padua' was produced in New York and in February 1892 'Lady Windermere's Fan' opened to an all-star audience in London. The reviews were mixed but Wilde soon followed it up with the highly acclaimed 'A Woman of No Importance' which consolidated his reputation as a popular playwright of considerable talent.

Oscar's life was soon overtaken by his passion of the beautiful, decadent and academically inept Lord Douglas, more familiarly known as Bosie. In May 1892 Oscar sent a note to his life-long friend Robert Ross that left no doubt about the nature of his feelings:

" My dearest Bobbie,

Bosie has insisted on stopping here for sandwiches. He is quite like a narcissus – so white and gold ... he lies like a hyacinth on the sofa, and I worship him.

You dear boy. Ever yours,

OSCAR"

In June 1893, after Bosie had departed for Egypt following a series of arguments with Wilde, the playwright completed 'An Ideal Husband', but by April 1894, Bosie had returned to London and the shadow of scandal grew. His father, the Marquess of Queensbury, a violent and irrational man, did not approve of his relationship with Wilde and was determined to bring him down:

"Alfred,

... your intimacy with this man Wilde. It must either cease or I will disown you and stop all money supplies. I am not going to try to analyse this intimacy, and I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it...

Your disgusted so-called father,

Queensbury”

Wilde eventually sued Queensbury for libel and in so doing badly miscalculated his chances in the legal process. Famously, he lost the case and shortly thereafter, armed with mounting evidence, including one of Oscar’s early letters to Alfred and numerous witnesses, Queensbury brought a charge of gross indecency against the playwright. The first trial began on 26 April 1895 but the jury could not reach a verdict. However pressure was brought to bear on the Solicitor-General who ordered a second trial and Wilde was condemned.

So ended Wilde’s career. His plays were immediately closed down and would not be produced again in the West End until the next century. Whilst in jail, he wrote ‘De Profundis’, a testament to his love for Douglas and the Arts and his most complex work. He also wrote ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’, a reflection on his life in prison.

Wilde was released in 1897. Alone and broke he lived in France until his death two years later.

Appendix II

Extract from Screenplay

[Mrs Cheveley is attempting to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern. She holds a letter written many years ago by Chiltern to Baron Arnheim giving inside knowledge about Suez Canal shares.]

9. INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT. CONTINUED:

ROBERT

(attempting nonchalance)

The affair to which you allude was no more than speculation.

MRS CHEVELEY

It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler.

ROBERT catches his wife's eye, who beams at him. After a second he returns a perfect smile.

MRS CHEVELEY

And now I am going to sell you that letter back, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme.

The smile freezes on Robert's lips.

ROBERT

(to Mrs Cheveley)

I cannot do what you ask me.

MRS CHEVELEY

You are standing on the edge of a precipice, Sir Robert. Supposing you refuse –

ROBERT

What then?

MRS CHEVELEY

Supposing I were to pay a visit to a newspaper office, and give them this scandal, and the proof of it. Think of their loathsome joy, think of the delight they would have in dragging you down, think of... Sir Edward!

SIR EDWARD

My dear Mrs Cheveley. I do hope we'll have the opportunity to meet up while you're in London. I so enjoy the cut and thrust of continental politics.

MRS CHEVELEY

I shall make it a particular priority.

As they move past Sir Edward:

ROBERT
(to Mrs Cheveley)
It is infamous, what you propose – infamous!

He struggles to contain his fury.

MRS CHEVELEY
(to Robert)
Oh, no. This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir
Robert, sooner or later.

ROBERT smiles, thinly.

CUT TO:

10. INT. STAIRCASE – NIGHT.

In the hall we find Mrs Cheveley and Gertrude:

MRS CHEVELEY
What a charming house you have, Lady Chiltern. I have
spent a delightful evening.

GERTRUDE
I am so glad. And so glad, too, that you have had a chance to
meet my husband, Mrs Cheveley. Though I must profess to
some curiosity as to the matter of your conversation.

MRS CHEVELEY
(smiling)
Ah.

ROBERT
(striding forward)
Your carriage is here, Mrs Cheveley.

MRS CHEVELEY
Thanks. Well, another time perhaps, Lady Chiltern. Good
Evening.

GERTRUDE
Good evening, Mrs Cheveley.