A Woman of No Importance

by Oscar Wilde

SUMMARY OF ACTS

ACT ONE

On Lady Hunstanton’s terrace, her well-bred guests engage in social gossip and small talk. Lady Caroline Ponteefract patronises Hester Worsley, an American visitor, managing to reveal her own ignorance as she does so. She also bullies her good-natured husband, Sir John and pronounces her opinions on everyone and everything. She dislikes Mrs. Allonby, one of the few subjects on which she and Hester agree, and disapproves of Hester sounding enthusiastic about young Gerald Arbuthnot, a bank clerk. At that point Gerald enters to tell everyone the good news that Lord Illingworth has offered to make him his personal secretary. Lady Hunstanton tells Lady Caroline that Lord Illingworth is aiming for ‘Diplomacy’, in other words to be a foreign ambassador. There is a rumour he may be sent to Vienna, which would be a very good posting for him, and of course for Gerald. Lady Hunstanton sends a letter with the footman to Gerald’s mother to tell her the good news and ask her to come and dine with them.

Gerald takes Hester off for a walk leaving Lady Hunstanton and Lady Caroline to gossip. Lady Caroline sends Sir John off to put on his overshoes and Mrs. Allonby enters with Lady Stutfield. Mrs. Allonby is always saying witty things to shock other people, while Mrs. Stutfield generally echoes what they say and they talk about absurdities until Sir John re-enters with Mr. Kelvil. The ladies quiz Mr. Kelvil on his duties as a politician and he tells them he has been writing on the subject of ‘purity’, which he considers very important, and that the growing influence of women in public life can only be a help, since they are on the side of morality. Lady Hunstanton comments that Lord Illingworth doesn’t seem to value women’s moral qualities, when the man himself enters and gives an excellent demonstration of his talents as a confirmed rake. He also refuses to be thanked for his offer to Gerald, saying that it was self-interest, since he had taken a fancy to the boy and he would very helpful to him. There is some discussion about Hester and her background – her father was a wealthy millionaire and philanthropist. The conversation then turns to politics and the poor, with Mr. Kelvil being very earnest and Lord Illingworth being very flippant. Eventually Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby go off to the conservatory, leaving the others to gossip about them. Lady Caroline is surprised that Lady Hunstanton always sees good in people, saying she prefers to believe bad until it is disproved, a sentiment she attributes to Lord Illingworth. Mr. Kelvil comments that he fears Lord Illingworth does not appreciate the beauty of home life, on which, he asserts, England is built, and that he is tainted with foreign ways. In addition he is sure that Lord Illingworth regards women as toys. He himself is married, with eight children, he tells Lady Caroline, and he has sent them all to the seaside.

Meanwhile, Lord Alfred Rufford has entered and is having his gold tipped cigarettes admired by Lady Stutfield. He tells her they are so expensive he can only afford to buy them when he is in debt, and shrugs off her anxious enquiries by saying that his debts give him something to think about. A letter from Mrs. Arbuthnot arrives to say she will not dine with them, but will come afterwards. There is some talk of her goodness and how valuable she is to the Archdeacon, and then the party go into tea.

Lord Illingworth enters with Mrs. Allonby and they have a witty conversation about marriage, men and women, until Gerald and Hester enter, there is an exchange of small talk and the young couple go off.

When Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby are left alone, she tells him of her dislike for Hester and says it is because she told everyone that she was only eighteen, and also that she was a puritan. Lord Illingworth says that a woman who will tell her age will tell anything. He also says that only plain women have any excuse for being puritans and that Hester is very pretty, adding provocatively, that he admires her. Mrs. Allonby responds that he is a bad man for admiring innocence and that bad women are the kind you don’t get tired of. Lord Illingworth says he has never met a woman so puritanical that he can’t get her to respond to his advances. Mrs. Allonby says that Hester would not and challenges him to prove it. After some witty sparring on the subject of ageing and attraction the footman summons them for tea. They flirt a little longer before moving off and Lord Illingworth glances through Mrs. Arbuthnot’s letter which is lying on the table. He comments that the handwriting reminds him of someone he used to know, but, in answer to Mrs. Allonby’s query, says it was ‘A woman of no importance.’

ACT TWO

It is after dinner, in the drawing room at Hunstanton, and only the ladies are there, having left the gentlemen to their port at the end of dinner. Inevitably men are the subject of discussion, with Mrs. Allonby being absurd at the expense of her husband. The discussion is frivolous, but then Lady
Hunstanton remembers Hester’s presence and the ladies are patronising about American society. Hester makes an impassioned speech, accusing the English upper class of being shallow, vain and uncaring, giving charity to the poor only to keep them quiet and encouraging the presence of men who have ruined women and cast them out. She says that women who have sinned should be punished, but so should the men and they should suffer equally instead of having one law for men and a different judgment for women. Mrs. Arbuthnot arrives during this speech. She is introduced to Hester. Mrs. Allonby and Lady Stuffield go out on to the terrace and the other ladies discuss Lord Illingworth’s offer to Gerald. Mrs. Arbuthnot says she has never met Lord Illingworth but eventually finds out that he was George Harford before succeeding to the title. She asks if Gerald can be sent for straight away. Sir John enters with Doctor Daubeney, the Archdeacon, who greets Mrs. Arbuthnot and tells the company his wife cannot be with them because of a headache, but is happiest alone. Mrs. Arbuthnot observes Lord Illingworth who doesn’t notice her, but talks to Mrs. Allonby, who has returned. She tells him that Hester has been lecturing them. Gerald enters with Lord Alfred and Mrs. Arbuthnot says she does not feel very well and asks him to take her home.

Gerald agrees but insists on introducing her to Lord Illingworth first. He seems much struck and stares from mother to son. Mrs. Arbuthnot says they have nothing in common and that he may change his mind about his offer to Gerald. The company moves off to the music room and Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot are left alone together. Lord Illingworth tells her he is delighted with their son and has realised what his life was lacking. Mrs. Arbuthnot says he has no right to any share in Gerald after abandoning him without a name. Lord Illingworth protests that it was she who left him and that his mother had offered her six hundred pounds a year, but Mrs. Arbuthnot says that all she wanted was marriage and respectability and that his mother had influenced him not to marry her. There is an argument in which she refuses to allow Gerald to go with his father, but Lord Illingworth demands to know how she will stop him and says that Gerald’s future is more important than her past. She begs him not to take away the only thing that has given her happiness, but when Gerald appears he tells him that he is ideally suited to the position he has offered and demands of Mrs. Arbuthnot whether she can find any reason, other than wanting him with her, why he should not go. Mrs. Arbuthnot is unable to answer and Lord Illingworth says the matter is settled and takes Gerald off to the terrace, leaving her alone.

**ACT THREE**

**The picture gallery at Hunstanton**

Lord Illingworth and Gerald are talking about Mrs. Arbuthnot. Gerald is very proud and protective of his mother, but wonders why she has never spoken of his father. Lord Illingworth agrees that she is a good woman, but points out that good women have limitations and don’t always understand the needs of young men, especially in needing a good career. He speaks cynically about society and about women and he admits to Gerald that he has never been married. He is telling Gerald about the new life he will have, when Mrs. Arbuthnot appears on the terrace and Lady Hunstanton enters with the Archdeacon, saying that she presumes Lord Illingworth has been explaining Gerald’s new duties to him. When she sees Mrs. Arbuthnot enter from the terrace she assumes that she feels very flattered at the notice Lord Illingworth is taking of her son. Lord Illingworth continues to amuse the company with his absurd views about comedy and tragedy, saints and sinners and Lady Hunstanton says that she and Mrs. Arbuthnot are too old fashioned to follow such views. Mrs. Arbuthnot says that she would be sorry to hold any opinions like Lord Illingworth’s. Lady Caroline enters wanting to know the whereabouts of Sir John. Lady Hunstanton is sure he was with Lady Stuffield in the yellow drawing room and Lady Caroline goes off, but Sir John then enters with Mrs. Allonby from the music room, while Lady Stuffield enters with Mr. Kelvil. The conversation turns to savages and world society and then to men and women until Lady Hunstanton remarks that women should forgive everything and Mrs. Arbuthnot disagrees, saying that the ruin of another woman’s life is unforgivable. She moves away as the company return to their frivolous chat about comedy and tragedy, saints and sinners and Lady Hunstanton says that she and Mrs. Arbuthnot are too old fashioned to follow such views. Mrs. Arbuthnot says that she would be sorry to hold any opinions like Lord Illingworth’s. Lady Caroline enters wanting to know the whereabouts of Sir John. Lady Hunstanton is sure he was with Lady Stuffield in the yellow drawing room and Lady Caroline goes off, but Sir John then enters with Mrs. Allonby from the music room, while Lady Stuffield enters with Mr. Kelvil. The conversation turns to savages and world society and then to men and women until Lady Hunstanton remarks that women should forgive everything and Mrs. Arbuthnot disagrees, saying that the ruin of another woman’s life is unforgivable. She moves away as the company return to their frivolous chat where Lord Illingworth always manages to hold contrary views from the norm in an entertaining manner. Doctor Daubeney then leaves and the company breaks up; Lady Hunstanton going to see the Archdeacon off, Sir John, Lady Stuffield, Mr. Kelvil and Lord Alfred going off, while Lady Caroline, just missing them, goes in the opposite direction. Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby go to look at the moon, but Mrs. Arbuthnot prevents Gerald from joining them by saying she wants to go home. Gerald doesn’t want to go because he is enjoying Lord Illingworth’s company and surprises his mother by saying they are going to India at the end of the month. He agrees to say goodbye to Lord Illingworth and goes to find him, leaving Mrs. Arbuthnot in great distress, pacing up and down. Hester enters and asks if they cannot be friends. They return to the subject of sinful women and Mrs. Arbuthnot agrees they should be punished and the men and also the children. Hester asks why, when she does not want him to go, she doesn’t make Gerald stay and she goes off to fetch...
Gerald. Lady Caroline is still looking for Sir John but Gerald, who returns at that moment has not seen him. When they are left alone, Gerald is really excited at the thought of being with Lord Illingworth who will help his career so that his mother will be proud of him. She implores him not to take the position, but Gerald becomes angry that she wants to stop him becoming successful and tells her that he is in love with Hester Worsley and the position would enable him to propose. Mrs. Arbuthnot knows Hester's views and decides she must reveal the truth about Lord Illingworth. She tells her own story, but in the third person and tries to describe the anguish suffered by the betrayed woman. Gerald however takes a different view and says that the woman must have been to blame just as much. At this, Mrs. Arbuthnot says she withdraws her objections and Gerald can go away with Lord Illingworth whenever he chooses. Just as Gerald is affirming his belief in Lord Illingworth's goodness, Hester runs in screaming and begs Gerald to save her. She is followed by Lord Illingworth who, she claims, insulted her. Gerald is furious and rushes to attack Lord Illingworth, pushing his mother out of the way when she intervenes. At last she cries to Gerald to stop because the man he wants to kill is his father. Hester steals away, Lord Illingworth is left frowning in dismay and Gerald leads his mother off.

**ACT FOUR**

Takes place in Mrs. Arbuthnot's sitting-room. Gerald is writing a letter. Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby are shown in by the maid. There is some conversation about Mrs. Arbuthnot's good taste and then Gerald says he has given up the idea of being Lord Illingworth's secretary, as their views on life are too different. The maid announces that Mrs. Arbuthnot cannot see anyone as she has a bad headache. Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby go and Gerald, after wondering what name he can sign to his letter, puts it in an envelope as Mrs. Arbuthnot enters. Gerald says he has asked Lord Illingworth to come to the house at four o'clock and that he will not be going with him. His mother says he shall not come into her house. Gerald says that he has written him a letter telling him he must marry his mother and that he will insist on him doing so. Mrs. Arbuthnot says she will not marry Lord Illingworth and the two argue about it, Gerald saying it is her duty and she denying that she has such a duty. Hester enters unseen while this discussion continues. Gerald points out that his mother believes in religion and she replies that that is a major reason for not making a mockery of marriage by swearing vows to a man she despises. She makes a long speech about what it means to be a mother and that giving her life to him and to others who needed care was her only solace. She says it was her dishonour that made her love Gerald so much and she will not change that now. Hester has heard this speech and comes running to Mrs. Arbuthnot saying that she will love her and they will go away together and find peace, especially since they both love Gerald. Gerald is very humbled and doesn’t know what to say to Hester, but she tells him that she doesn’t care for wealth and will gladly share hers with him. She now realises that the only law of God is love. Gerald and Hester go off to the garden, but only after insisting Mrs. Arbuthnot will stay with them.

The maid announces a gentleman but before he can be refused, Lord Illingworth enters. He has come to make an agreement whereby Gerald will spend six months with each of them. When Mrs. Arbuthnot reminds him of the brawl on the previous evening he merely says that he is proud of Gerald for standing up to him the way he did. He wants to settle some property on Gerald and give her an allowance. Mrs. Arbuthnot shows him Hester and Gerald in the garden and tells him he is too late and Gerald doesn’t need him. The two of them love each other and they are all going away together. Lord Illingworth says she has grown hard and all he wants is his son. He sees the letter and reads it. He will not admit that it is his duty to marry her, but he will do it to get his son back. He is ready to marry her even if it means giving up his ambitions to become an ambassador. Mrs. Arbuthnot refuses to marry him because she hates him and her love of Gerald and her hate for his father feed each other. She says that Gerald despises him and he asks what arguments she used to make him believe her. She replies that it was Hester, not her that made him see things truly. Lord Illingworth acknowledges defeat and then says she was a pretty plaything for an affair, adding it was odd to encounter in society his mistress and, he is about to add, his bastard, but Mrs. Arbuthnot seizes his glove and hits him across the face with it before he can utter the word. He leaves and she sits sobbing on the sofa. Gerald and Hester come in and she calls him her boy. Hester asks if she can be her daughter and when they see the glove and ask who has been visiting, Mrs. Arbuthnot replies it was ‘a man of no importance’.
CHARACTERS

LORD ILLINGWORTH

He is a man of about 45 and a bachelor. He is witty and clever and a practised flirt, who knows how to make himself agreeable to women. He is Mrs. Arbuthnot’s former lover and seducer and the father of Gerald Arbuthnot. He is embarked on a promising diplomatic career and it is rumoured he is shortly to become Ambassador to Vienna. His accidental acquaintance with Gerald, to whom he offers the post of private secretary, sets in motion the chain of events that form the main plot of the play. He enjoys the company of Mrs. Allonby, who has a similar witty and amoral outlook to his own, and who also engages in flirting. Lord Illingworth is convinced that no woman can resist his charms for long, even a puritan like Hester Worsley, as he says,

“I don’t think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her.”

He makes a cynical bet with Mrs. Allonby that he can overcome her resistance, which turns out to be his undoing.

The main virtue that is shown in him is his fondness for Gerald, as he seems genuinely to care for his son, despite having abandoned him before birth. He wishes to have Gerald with him, to help his career and to settle an estate on him. This is the only weapon that Mrs. Arbuthnot has against him and she uses it to turn the tables on him at the end.

Lord Illingworth is seen as very good company and he is a vehicle for many of Wilde’s aphorisms and clever comments throughout the play. One of his first exchanges is with Lady Stutfield,

LADY STUTFIELD

Everyone I know says you are very, very wicked.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about, nowadays, saying things against one behind one’s back that are absolutely and entirely true.

He is also given some of Wilde’s best known sayings:

“Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.”

“Nothing succeeds like excess.”

The audience discovers in the course of the play that Lord Illingworth only succeeded to the title because his elder brother was killed in a hunting accident. Until then, as Lady Hunstanton says,

“When I knew Lord Illingworth first as plain George Harford, he was simply a very brilliant young man about town, with not a penny of money except what poor dear Lady Cecilia gave him.”

This is a carefully placed explanation by Wilde which may help to explain why he takes such an interest in Gerald, since he has been in a similar position himself. He is presented overall as a ‘dandy’ – a man who lives for pleasure and ambition, sees Puritanism as the enemy of life, has few morals and takes a supremely cynical view of those who have. When Mrs. Arbuthnot reminds him of his father’s view that it was his duty to marry her, he replies,

“Oh, duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does one’s self.”

He is known as a womaniser, as Mr. Kelvil remarks,

“I am afraid, too, that Lord Illingworth regards woman simply as a toy.”

The choice of the pompous and hypocritical MP to make this comment may, however, undermine its value in the eyes of the audience.
The frequently heard opinion that the villain of a play is generally more interesting than the hero / heroine is certainly true of Lord Illingworth. Although he is presented as a man of few morals, a seducer and a cynic he is attractive and amusing and Wilde has given him many of the best lines in the play. Beside him, the apparently moral and the good characters appear dull at best and self-righteous at worst, which, in view of the speech to Gerald that was cut from the start of Act III, was probably Wilde's intention. Some critics have said that Lord Illingworth, like his other dandies, is an embodiment of the author himself. Inasmuch as he represents the voice of the aesthete, the individualist and the radical thinker against the rigid and the conventional views of society, there may well be someone true in this idea.

**Mrs. Arbuthnot**

Apparently a respectable widow who does good works among the poor and is a regular churchgoer, she declines invitations to dinner parties and other social amusements, although she does visit the upper class characters at Lady Hunstanton’s, since they all appear to know her and her son, Gerald. The audience soon discover, however, that she has a secret past, in which she was the lover of Lord Illingworth, whose son Gerald is. His refusal to marry her has led to her bringing up Gerald on her own and her love for him is all consuming – some might feel it is overly strong for a mother-child relationship. Although she feels her past sin bitterly, she is unable to repent it because Gerald is the result. Her religious beliefs lead her to agree with the puritanical Hester Worsley that women who sin should be outcasts, but so, too, should the men and the children. A number of writers have suggested that Mrs. Arbuthnot’s constant brooding on a transgression that took place twenty years before, is excessive and unwholesome and it may certainly appear so to a modern audience. However it seems to be explained at the end of the play, when she tells Lord Illingworth that it is hatred of him that has kept her going, fed by her equal love for Gerald. This is not a Christian sentiment and it rather undercuts her reputation for being a ‘good’ person. (It has been pointed out that it ministers too much to his vanity, since being hated for so long is almost as good as being loved for so long!) It is a sentiment that many feminists may be in sympathy with and it seems to appeal to Hester, who abandons her puritanical outlook to say that she would choose Mrs. Arbuthnot of all the women in the world to be her mother. One of Wilde’s main problems in including such a character is that she cannot – or at any rate does not – converse in the witty and frivolous style of which he is the master. When we first see her, she enters unannounced from the terrace and merely makes polite conversation until she discovers Lord Illingworth’s identity, when she sends immediately for her son and demands that he takes her home. She tends to speak in dramatic statements. When Lord Illingworth asks why her son is called Gerald, she replies,

> “After a man whose heart I broke – after my father.”

When she is unable to make Lord Illingworth feel guilty for the past, she turns to pleading,

> “You are so rich in other things. Leave me the little vineyard of my life; leave me the walled-in garden and the well of water; the ewe-lamb God sent me, in pity or in wrath, oh! leave me that, George, don’t take Gerald from me.”

Apart from the fact that Christopher Nassaar, in his excellent analysis of the incestuous Freudian undertones of the play, has used the garden imagery here as evidence of these feelings, the idea of a vineyard, which needs careful looking after, and a walled garden have associations with a claustrophobic kind of nurturing, which would see Gerald tied to his mother’s apron strings for ever. Despite the audience’s undoubted sympathy for Mrs. Arbuthnot and what she has suffered, there is some unease about her possessiveness towards Gerald and the way in which both parents use him as a pawn in their private warfare. Despite all this, the moment that father and son go off together at the end of Act II, leaving her all alone, is one of the most poignant moments in the play.

Mrs. Arbuthnot’s feminist appeal lies in her refusal to repent for the sin that has given a child she loves and also in her steadfast refusal to marry the man she hates, however respectable it might make her in the eyes of society. As she tells Gerald,

> “There is no atonement possible. I am disgraced: he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and a woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers. The man goes free.”

In this plain, unambiguous statement, it may be possible to discern the views of the author, for Wilde hated the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Mrs. Arbuthnot’s ‘monologue’ as it often called, towards the end of the play, is the turning point that makes Gerald realise the depth of her love and makes Hester, who has
overheard it, realise that love is the most important thing. The two women together have everything they need, which is why Mrs. Arbuthnot is able to triumph over Lord Illingworth at the end.

**GERALD ARBUTHNOT**

The illegitimate son of Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth, Gerald is young and rather naïve. He has a job as a clerk in a provincial bank, but is the protégé of Lady Hunstanton, who thinks his mother is a good woman. This connection has enabled him to meet Lord Illingworth, who takes a liking to him and offers him a job as his private secretary. This is a post that opens up unforeseen worlds to Gerald and would make him part of a society he could never have dreamed of entering otherwise. He is dazzled by the prospect and by the charming and witty Lord Illingworth, whom he regards as a desirable mentor, telling his mother

> “He knows more about life than anyone I have ever met.”

When his mother tries to prevent him from accepting the offered post, he tells her,

> “Of course I have been quite happy with you. But a man can’t always stay with his mother. No chap does. I want to make myself a position, to do something.”

Without telling him about the past, there is little his mother can say to prevent him leaving. When she tries to explain that Lord Illingworth is a bad man by telling her own story in the third person, Gerald’s reaction is hurtful.

> “My dear mother, it all sounds very tragic, of course. But I dare say the girl was just as much to blame as Lord Illingworth was.”

Gerald is also in love with Hester Worsley, the puritanical American heiress, and is very conscious that his new position would enable him to propose to her. It is not until Lord Illingworth forces his attentions on Hester and Gerald, springing to her defence, tries to kill him, that he finds out the truth about his parentage. He then rejects his father, but is determined that he should be forced into marrying his mother. His motives for this, he declares, are purely for her sake, despite her refusal to marry Lord Illingworth. It is the impassioned speech with which she rejects his plans that make him realise the strength of her love for him and her hatred of his father. Gerald is then surprised by Hester taking sides with his mother and he is (literally) brought to knees in front of both of them. At the end of the play, Gerald is left between the two women who love him with Hester’s fortune enabling them to make a new start, presumably in America.

**HESTER WORSLEY**

As an American and therefore an outsider to the brilliant society which Wilde depicts at the beginning of the play, Hester is in a position to see its faults and shortcomings more clearly than those who are part of it. She is both an heiress and an orphan, which enables her to ‘adopt’ Mrs. Arbuthnot as her mother at the end of the play. The rather self righteous attitude she takes at first can hardly endear her to the hostess whose decadent lifestyle she so deprecates, although the ignorant and patronising attitude taken by the English towards America and Hester herself, is unlikely to endear them to her. Wilde made several trips to America and it is possible that at least some of what she says is the author’s way of approving American democratic views.

> “You rich people in England, you don’t know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season.”

Of course, it is one of the interesting contradictions about Wilde himself, that he does exactly this in his plays, while holding similar views about the society that he made so attractively witty. Hester continues her diatribe by referring to Victorian views on ‘fallen women’.

> “You are unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust.”

This opinion is not contradicted by Hester’s softer views at the end of the play, when she admits she loves Gerald. The puritanical ideas that can be held by an eighteen year old with no experience of what they mean in practice, have undergone a change in the face of her understanding of Mrs. Arbuthnot’s life.
“I was wrong. God’s law is only Love.”

For her this means love of Gerald, but behind it is the connotation of Jesus’ saying that all the commandments come down to ‘Love God and Love one another’.

**LADY JANE HUNSTANTON**

A vaguely kind hearted woman, who is the hostess for the first three Acts of the play. She has taken Gerald under her wing and is mildly put out that his mother will not come to dinner. Her understanding is not strong, but she loves witty company and is a great admirer of Lord Illingworth. She has difficulty in remembering things, which leads to humorous comments.

“I was in hopes he would have married Lady Kelso. But I believe he said her family was too large. Or was it her feet? I forget which.”

She often does not comprehend jokes, especially those of Mrs. Allonby and Lord Illingworth. When the former says that she has heard there is an orchid in the conservatory ‘as beautiful as the seven deadly sins’, her reaction is,

“My dear, I hope there is nothing of the kind. I will certainly speak to the gardener.”

She always has nice things to say about people, including her dead husband,

“Well, I suppose the type of husband has completely changed since my young days, but I’m bound to state that poor, dear Hunstanton was the most delightful of creatures, and as good as gold.”

She patronises Hester Worsley, but probably unintentionally with comments like,

“I hear you have such pleasant society in America. Quite like our own in places, my son wrote to me.”

Her ignorance is shown when Hester is comparing America favourably with England and comments that “we are trying to build up something that will last longer than brick or stone” to which Lady Hunstanton replies,

“Ah, yes, an Iron Exhibition, is it not, at that place that has the curious name?”

Despite her pleasant nature, however, she is clearly a member of the upper class society that Wilde is satirising, shown in her remark to Hester about Lord Henry Weston whose habits of seduction she has been deploring,

“The only part where I thought you were a little hard was about Lady Caroline’s brother, about poor Lord Henry. He is really such good company.”

As though being ‘good company’ was enough to excuse any kind of bad behaviour.

Later on, when Mrs. Arbuthnot says that women should never forgive the ruin of another woman’s life, she comments,

“Aah! those things are very sad, no doubt, but I believe there are admirable homes where people of that kind are looked after and reformed …”

She is therefore seen as a typical member of the conventional and unsympathetic Victorian aristocracy and is as ready to succumb to Lord Illingworth’s charm as any of the others,

“How charming you are, dear Lord Illingworth. You always find out that one’s most glaring fault is one’s most important virtue. You have the most comforting views of life.”

It is through Lady Hunstanton’s artless chatter about aristocratic families that Mrs. Arbuthnot learns the identity of Lord Illingworth, so that Wilde uses her both as an entertaining character, as a foil to Lady Caroline and Mrs. Allonby, and as someone to further the plot.

**MRS. ALLONBY**

She is a female version of Lord Illingworth, to some extent. We never see her husband, Ernest, but we do hear about him. He would be in the way of the ongoing flirtation she is conducting with Lord Illingworth.
The audience cannot help feeling that she is far more suited to Illingworth, than Mrs. Arbuthnot, although she brings out his worst traits. She has a similar line of repartee to Lord Illingworth’s, as when Lady Stutfield asserts that the world was made for men, and she replies,

“We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things forbidden to us than are forbidden to them.”

She and Lord Illingworth enjoy each other’s company and in Act I, when they are alone together, she challenges him to make love to Hester, whom she is confident will resist. They are good at verbal fencing and the following is a typical exchange that shows how well matched Wilde has made them.

**LORD ILLINGWORTH**

Shall we go into tea?

**MRS. ALLONBY**

Do you like such simple pleasures?

**LORD ILLINGWORTH**

I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex. But, if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and woman in a garden.

**MRS. ALLONBY**

It ends with Revelations.

**LORD ILLINGWORTH**

You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.

**MRS. ALLONBY**

I have still the mask.

**LORD ILLINGWORTH**

It makes your eyes lovelier.

When the women are alone at the start of Act II, it is Mrs. Allonby who leads the conversation on men, including her boredom with her husband. When she is finally pushed to say what he has done to deserve being ignored for years, she replies,

“When Ernest and I were engaged he swore to me positively on his knees that he never had loved anyone before in the whole course of his life. I was very young at the time, so I didn’t believe him, I needn’t tell you. Unfortunately, however, I made no enquiries of any kind till after I had been actually married four or five months. I found out then that what he had told me was perfectly true. And that sort of thing makes a man so absolutely uninteresting.”

This is fairly typical of Mrs. Allonby’s views on men and she favours the company with an absurd, but entertaining monologue of her idea of ‘The Ideal Man’.

She accompanies Lady Hunstanton on her visit to Mrs. Arbuthnot in Act IV, but this is mainly so that Wilde can provide some lively dialogue while they are waiting to see Gerald’s mother. Mrs. Allonby’s main role appears to be to show Lord Illingworth’s flirting skills, as well as her own, and to fill in for him with witty conversation when he is not on stage.

**LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRACT**

She is a sharp tongued woman, who always thinks the worst of people – in contrast to Lady Hunstanton. She has a lot of common sense and little patience with rhetoric. She is the master of the ‘put down’ and there are several examples of this in the first few moments of the play. She is also hypocritical in that she speaks badly of people behind their backs.

She says to Hester at the beginning of the play,

“Well, you couldn’t come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley, though the house is excessively damp, and dear lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here.”
As soon as Lady Hunstanton appears, however, she tells her,

“Jane, I was just saying what a pleasant party you have asked us to meet. You have a wonderful power of selection. It is quite a gift.”

She represents the most snobbish aspect of the upper class, saying to Hester,

“In my young days, Miss Worsley, one never met anyone in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing.”

Later, she says,

“I am not at all in favour of amusements for the poor, Jane. Blankets and coals are sufficient.”

She insists on calling Mr. Kelvil, ‘Mr. Kettle’ which no doubt puts him in his place, as a mere member of the House of Commons, but her most cutting snub comes just at the end of Hester’s impassioned speech about having one law for men and another for women, when she says,

“Might I, dear Miss Worsley, as you are standing up, ask you for my cotton that is just behind you?”

She bullies her fourth husband, Sir John, constantly telling him what to do, and cannot bear him to be in the company of another woman, as her pursuit of him in Act III testifies. She may be justified in her anxiety to some extent, as Sir John is seen by Lady Hunstanton in the drawing room with Lady Stutfield one moment, but then enters with Mrs. Allonby the next. Lady Caroline’s last appearance in the play is a convenient fill-in between Hester’s exit to fetch Gerald, and Gerald’s entrance and shows her still looking for her escaped husband since she has decided it is his bedtime.

**Doctor Daubeny**

He is the Archdeacon of the local parish and admires Mrs. Arbuthnot who works with him for the church and for the parish poor and sick etc. His main topic of conversation seems to be his wife’s health, which appears to get worse every time he mentions her. His main function in the play seems to be to vouch for Mrs. Arbuthnot as a church going and charitable member of the parish and to create a ‘running gag’ about his wife. He has very few lines and disappears in Act III on a final reference,

“Tuesday is always one of Mrs. Daubeny’s bad nights.” The audience are left wondering whether the Archdeacon uses his wife as an excuse to go out alone, or whether she uses it as an excuse not to accompany him.

**Lady Stutfield**

A rather gushing woman who always seems to use double adjectives for emphasis and appears always to agree with whatever anyone else says. She seems quite anxious to find a man and to be well thought of by everyone. Her function in the play is unclear, except that she is presented as a social type and could be either irritating or amusing, depending on the actress who plays her.

**Mr. Kelvil**

A Member of Parliament, he is rather pompous and also hypocritical. He is writing on the subject of ‘purity’ and says that women “are always on the side of morality, public and private.” He claims to believe in the equality of women as “the helpmate of man in public as in private life” but has sent his own wife and their eight children off to the seaside, with no certainty that he will join them to experience the joys of home life that he extols so readily. His function in the play seems mainly to give Wilde an opportunity of poking fun at pompous public servants and to create a foil for Lord Illingworth.

**Lord Alfred Rufford**

His presence in the play is difficult to explain, since he says hardly anything and seems to be there simply for the mention of his gold tipped cigarettes and his debts. Most directors with limited resources would cut him out.
**THEMES AND IDEAS**

The main theme is obviously that of the betrayed woman, who becomes, in the eyes of society, 'a woman of no importance'. It is a subject that has occupied other Victorian writers and artists, such as Christina Rossetti and Mary Gaskell who were aware that the men who seduced and abandoned these often naïve girls were still welcomed into society, while for the woman it meant social and often financial ruin. If she was pregnant, her child would be illegitimate and, as Mrs. Arbuthnot reminds Hester at the end of the play,

"But we are disgraced. We rank among the outcasts. Gerald is nameless."

Wilde felt strongly that men and women should be treated equally when it came to sexual matters. It is a main topic of Lady Windermere's Fan as well as A Woman of No Importance. As several writers have suggested, it is not difficult to see that a concealed sin, especially a sexual one, and a plea for forgiveness might well reflect Wilde's own situation in a society where his homosexuality ultimately made him an outcast.

It is essential, for this theme to gain the audience's sympathy, that the woman in question should be morally good, which is why Mrs. Arbuthnot may seem a little too rigid, especially for a modern audience who do not share the narrow values of Wilde's society. However, there is considerable disagreement among critics about the play's merits and its 'message'. Some think that the plot is thin and worn out and exists only so that Wilde can use his talent for witty repartee; others maintain that the epigrams become very tiresome after a while and that the real merit of the play lies in the plot – and particularly the confrontations between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot. Some have criticised his presentation of Mrs. Arbuthnot, Hester Worsley and Gerald as being wooden, 'stock' characters while the society figures are well drawn and entertaining; others have accused him of creating a group of 'talkalikes' in the society figures, while making the 'moral' figures noble and sincere.

It would seem to be time for a new appraisal of Wilde's achievement in a play which is still performed, but which presents problems for any director.

If there has been consensus hitherto that Wilde was satirising upper class Victorian society in its hypocrisy, its acceptance of male dominance, its snobbishness and complacency and its indifference to the sufferings of the poor, then all of this can be found in A Woman of No Importance.

The hypocrisy can be seen in the way in which normally serious subjects like politics and social problems are dismissed in a light-hearted way, a technique of Wilde's that shows the upper class for what they are, while maintaining his reputation as a wit and an aesthete. When Lady Hunstanton, in a moment of dramatic irony in Act IV, tells Gerald, "One feels your mother's good influence in everything she has about her" Mrs. Allonby replies,

"Lord Illingworth says that all influence is bad, but that a good influence is the worst in the world."

This is a typical Wilde paradox that says more about the speaker than they intend. Mrs. Allonby's quoting of Lord Illingworth betrays her closeness to him, while the flippancy of his comment reveals his unsuitability to be a mentor for Gerald, who was certainly under his influence at the beginning of the play. Mrs. Arbuthnot's 'good influence' is also his undoing.

The comment made by Lady Caroline in Act I about a French governess,

"She was far too good-looking to be in any respectable household" shows the double standards being used, since her qualifications as a teacher are not even mentioned. This is all part of the subtlety with which Wilde satirises the society characters.

He also makes use of the humourless Mr. Kelvil, who believes that purity is "the one subject of really national importance, now-a-days" and remarks,

"I find that the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard." Not only does this imply that the other classes do not have any such desire, but also that those who are supposed to be leaders and therefore setting an example are signal failing in their duty.

The acceptance of male dominance was widespread. Women had little power in law and until 1882 even their possessions became their husband's property on marriage. The suffragette movement had not yet begun and, although divorces were obtainable, they were considered scandalous. Girls in the middle and upper classes
were expected to remain virgins until they married, unlike boys who were encouraged to ‘sow their wild oats’ before they settled down. Any girl who lost her good name or, worse, became pregnant, was considered a ‘fallen woman’ and unless her seducer consented (or was forced) to marry her, she had no hope of a respectable marriage or a place in society. Her illegitimate child would be considered in the same way and although the Poor Law stated that the father was responsible for the financial care of bastard children until they were sixteen, the proof of paternity was hard to get.

In A Woman of No Importance Wilde undercuts the reality of society by giving the women more power than the men. In one of his most paradoxical ideas, he gives Mrs. Arbuthnot power by refusing to marry the father of her child. Hester is strong both because she is an heiress but also because she believes in a different set of values from the English upper class and she is young enough to change her views in the light of experience. The other women in the play can also be seen as strong either because they are widows or because their husbands do what they are told.

There are suggestions, though, that Wilde deserves deeper analysis than he is generally given. Christopher Nassaar [see attached notes] asserts that “The theme in A Woman of No Importance is that, despite apparent differences, human beings are basically alike - that is, totally corrupt.”

He claims that this idea is supported by the discussion of Patagonia and the information given by Sir John that the savages are very similar to ‘cultured people’. Nassaar asserts that “the sexual practices of the Patagonian savages were far from what the Victorians would have considered proper”.

However there is very little evidence to suggest that this is what the henpecked Sir John has been discussing with Mrs. Allonby, although she may well be making a veiled reference to sexual licence when she says they do “apparently everything”.

[The only mention of these practices I could find was in a book called ‘Primitive Marriage’ by John McLennan in 1865 in which he observes that female infanticide (to ensure the provision of healthy males) led to the capture of women from other tribes as wives, or even to women having several husbands.]

The idea that Wilde was practising a particularly subtle joke on his audiences by presenting a play that appears to be concerned with a wronged woman getting her revenge and virtue having its true reward, while all the time creating a play in which the apparently moral characters are equally as unwholesome as the apparently immoral ones is an interesting thesis that deserves consideration. In view of Wilde’s reputation for decadence it is a reasonable assumption that he may have been doing just this. The Freudian undertones of incest are too strong to be ignored by a modern audience however a Victorian one chose to regard the relationship between Gerald and his mother. Not that anyone is suggesting that this is a conscious desire on her part; on the contrary she cannot see her own character except through a veil of excessive sentimentality.

It is also possible for a modern reading of the play to see it as a feminist text. The two women who are strong in their beliefs, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester, come to share a common feeling and by standing together they leave Lord Illingworth, the hitherto dominant villain, defeated and unnecessary, in fact ‘a man of no importance.’ Mrs. Arbuthnot’s determination not to marry Lord Illingworth and put herself in his power, is to be applauded, while Hester, in marrying Gerald, will hold the purse strings and thus the real power. In any case Gerald will be outnumbered by the two loves of his life and thus unable to become dominant, even if he had the inclination. By travelling to America, the trio have turned their backs on the old class ridden society in favour of the new world, where, as Hester says “we have no lower classes.” f the play is viewed as a struggle between the sexes, there is, as shown above, little doubt who wins in the end. However, it is important to bear in mind that, for much of the play, this outcome seems quite unlikely. There would be very little drama if that was the case. Right up until Lord Illingworth makes his ill conceived move on Hester at the end of Act III, he holds all the cards. He is the powerful and dominant male, the seducer who has refused to marry the mother of his child; the charming and entertaining companion; the slightly dangerous flirt who is irresistible to women and the ambitious diplomat who is able to offer his son a position in the world as well as a male role model. It is Hester’s puritanical reaction to his advances that brings out the truth of Gerald’s parentage, but, although this changes his opinion of Lord Illingworth, it is not until Mrs. Arbuthnot’s passionate declaration of her refusal to marry and her love for Gerald, that Hester becomes her close ally and Gerald, the other male in the equation, is defeated and then rewarded with Hester and his mother sharing a bright future with him.
There has been some criticism of the play that it presents little in the way of plot for the first Act and a half; merely presenting the audience with a great deal of witty conversation, but this is to imply that the plot should move quickly to the detriment of everything else. Act I introduces us to the society characters and sets up the underlying relationships and themes. It shows Lady Caroline patronising Hester Worsley and Hester’s preference for Gerald Arbuthnot, as well as telling the audience of Lord Illingworth’s magnificent offer to Gerald, which, in turn, causes Lady Hunstanton to write and invite Mrs. Arbuthnot to come up to her house. Wilde uses it to introduce several ‘running gags’ like Lady Caroline’s insistence on referring to Mr. Kelvil as ‘Kettle’ and her constant nagging of Sir John (who later proves to have his own methods of avoidance). Mr. Kelvil himself is not a necessary character in terms of the plot, but he does show up both the hypocrisy of the public middle class man [himself] while also providing opportunities for the upper class to reveal their complacent prejudice and ignorance, as Lady Hunstanton remarks,

“I am sure, Lord Illingworth, you don’t think that uneducated people should be allowed to have votes?”

(It is hard to know who she was thinking of, since voters consisted of adult employed males who had been resident for a year. Men who didn’t fit this description and all women were without votes at this time.)

The audience is made aware of the relationship between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby, at the same time as he accepts her challenge to kiss Hester. Their flirtatious exchange culminates in his reading Mrs. Arbuthnot’s letter and being reminded of someone he once knew, whom he dismisses as ‘a woman of no importance.’

The beginning of Act II shows the ladies on their own, which gives the audience an opportunity to observe their relationships and their attitudes to men. This results in an interesting difference of opinion between Lady Caroline, who says that any man in love with a married woman “should be married off in a week to some plain respectable girl, in order to teach them not to meddle with other people’s property” and Mrs. Allonby, who contradicts her,

“I don’t think we should ever be spoken of as other people’s property. All men are married women’s property. That is the only true definition of what married women’s property really is. But we don’t belong to any one.”

Thus Wilde puts the socially conventional view into the mouth of a woman who bullies her husband, while Mrs. Allonby gives herself away as a female predator, while masquerading as a frivolous wit. This section of the play also provides the audience with Hester’s views on the superiority of the American way of life, where “true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country.” The obvious unlikelihood of this suggests her youth and naiveté, and her views on ‘fallen women’ coincide dramatically with Mrs. Arbuthnot’s unannounced appearance behind her. [An appearance that is mirrored in Act IV, by Hester’s own unannounced appearance during Mrs. Arbuthnot’s speech on marriage.]

It is the conversation between Lady Caroline and Lady Hunstanton that informs the audience of Lord Illingworth’s identity and leads Mrs. Arbuthnot to ask for Gerald. The gentlemen’s entrance at that point, ensures a meeting between Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth, followed by the confrontation wherein the audience learns of their past history. The Act ends dramatically after Lord Lillingworth challenges Mrs. Arbuthnot to give Gerald the reason he cannot accept the post he has been offered, and father and son go off, leaving her alone.

The start of Act III gives the audience an opportunity to see Lord Illingworth and Gerald together and form an opinion of what kind of father he would be. He begins by praising Mrs. Arbuthnot as a “thoroughly sensible woman”, but later undermines her by saying,

“A mother’s love is very touching, of course, but it is often curiously selfish.”
There is considerable dramatic irony in the exchange, where Gerald’s father is discussed, especially when he says,

“It is very curious, my mother never talks to me about my father. I sometimes think she must have married beneath her.” Gerald means this in the sense of social class, but it can be taken to mean morally, in which case he is right. He and Lord Illingworth discuss serious things like society, women and love, but it consists mainly of Gerald asking questions and Lord Illingworth giving apparently trivial, but witty, answers. Following this, the company seems to have divided itself into couples, with Lady Caroline constantly hunting for Sir John. Although this is merely a social event, it may be symbolic of the way they behave in private, with the partners changing discreetly at intervals. The Archdeacon, who is also the subject of a ‘running gag’ about his wife’s health, leaves and Mrs. Arbuthnot asks Gerald to take her home. Wilde ensures that Gerald first takes his leave of Lord Illingworth, in order to give Hester time to talk to Mrs. Arbuthnot, with whom she finds herself in sympathy. She tells her,

“I wish you would let us be friends. You are so different from the other women here. When you came into the Drawing-room this evening, somehow you brought with you a sense of what is good and pure in life.”

In one sense this is dramatic irony, since the society she is part of would consider Mrs. Arbuthnot to be a ‘fallen woman’, but in the real moral sense, she is good.

Gerald’s re-appearance leads to the conversation with his mother about why he should not go with Lord Illingworth and his heartless male response to the story of his past sexual conduct that leads his mother to say he can go whenever he wishes. Just at the point where he has what he wants, he learns the truth about the man he admires. He saves Hester from his unwanted advances, and the Act ends on the melodramatic line from Mrs. Arbuthnot,

“Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father.”

So far, all the action has taken place in the same evening, at Hunstanton and therefore in ‘real time’ more or less. Act IV takes place the following morning at Mrs. Arbuthnot’s house. The audience is aware of Hester’s puritan views about sinners and are presumably wondering what Gerald is going to do. They are kept waiting by Wilde, as are the two characters who have come to see Mrs. Arbuthnot, Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby, who are unaware of the dramatic events at the end of Act III. Their unsatisfied exit coincides with the entrance of Mrs. Arbuthnot and her argument with Gerald about marrying Lord Illingworth. This subject, about which Gerald has written to his father, allows her to make her passionate speech about marriage and about mother-love, which Hester is brought in to overhear. The two women are brought together by mutual feelings as well as their love for Gerald. Only when their future is settled, does the author bring Lord Illingworth on to the scene for a final confrontation. His desire to help his son and to have him with him is the one thing that Mrs. Arbuthnot can deny him and she does. Even his offer of marriage, after reading Gerald’s letter, makes no difference except to provoke her hatred and he leaves on one final melodramatic flourish as Mrs. Arbuthnot strikes him with his glove – interestingly a possibility that has been discussed between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby in Act I, only with Hester doing the striking. The two ‘mirrored’ situations in the play are both concerned with Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester which reinforces their similarity. The play ends with Hester wanting to be her daughter and the final line about ‘a man of no importance’ as revenge is complete.

A Woman of No Importance has the structure of a well made play, which in Wilde’s time was agreed to consist of an ‘inciting incident’ an ‘obligatory confrontation’ and a dénouement. Here, the first of these is the offer to Gerald that brings his parentage to light; the second actually brings us two, rather than a single confrontation; that between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot at the end of Act II, and that between Lord Illingworth and Gerald at the end of Act III. The denouement, as is proper, comes towards the end of Act IV.
There has been criticism levelled at Wilde about this play which suggests that the witty, clever repartee of the society characters sits very uneasily with the impassioned rhetoric of the ‘moral’ characters and that either the drama drives out the wit or the epigrams are somehow passing the time for the audience in between the dramatic episodes. Some modern critics, however, have shown that because Wilde’s dialogue is clever and enjoyable, it is possible to miss the underlying satirical implications that fit in very well with the more serious themes of the play. For example, Lord Illingworth’s apparently trivial comment,

“So much marriage is certainly not becoming. Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin; but twenty years of marriage make her something like a public building.”

If this is analysed it contains the idea of a twenty year relationship, like that between himself and Gerald’s mother; it contains the idea of an unremarked romance alongside the word ‘ruin’ and it gives the contrast to this in the alternative of marriage and a public institution. This is hardly irrelevant to the main theme of the play. Again, he tells Gerald, speaking about society,

“To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy. Society is a necessary thing. No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him, and women rule society.”

Underlying this seemingly facetious comment are echoes of the situation in which he left Gerald’s mother – out of society – but there is also a foreshadowing of the ending of the play in which the power of women, and the need for their backing is amply demonstrated. This careful crafting so that moral and social comment are masked by seemingly trivial cleverness, is true of much of this type of dialogue, which is used to reveal characters and attitudes. When Mrs. Allonby remarks,

“The one advantage of playing with fire, Lady Caroline, is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don’t know how to play with it who get burned up.”

the audience should be aware of a character that enjoys ‘living dangerously’ but also the truth behind this which is that innocence and moral goodness are more likely to be ruined than experience and cynicism.

Of course, Wilde uses other things than paradox to create laughter in his audience. Lady Hunstanton’s persistent misunderstanding and forgetfulness are also used to comic effect,

“Why, it was from Melthrope, which is only two miles from here, that Lady Belton eloped with Lord Fethersdale. I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which.”

Here it is the juxtaposition of two completely different things in connection with death, added to the notion that joy at his wife’s elopement might have been the cause, that creates the humour.

There is also the time-honoured joke of the bullied husband, Sir John, who manages to elude his domineering wife in Act II to flirt with several other women, while she vainly pursues him. His reiteration of “I am quite comfortable, I assure you.” which has no more effect on Lady Caroline than his attempts to correct her when she calls Mr. Kelvil, “Mr. Kettle” establish him as both henpecked and easygoing, while Lady Caroline’s unshakeable conviction that she is always right, the fact she speaks mainly in statements and commands and that she always evil of everyone shows her to be the ‘public building’ that Lord Illingworth calls her.

The Archdeacon does appear to be a character that Wilde introduces merely so that he can act as a ‘running gag’ (although he gives respectability and moral credence to Mrs. Arbuthnot as well). Each time his wife is mentioned, he has something worse to report about her health from his first mention of her as ‘a martyr’ to headaches, through her deafness, her failing eyesight up to his parting shot, over Lady Hunstanton’s gift of partridges,

“It is very kind of you, but Mrs. Daubeny never touches solids now. Lives entirely on jellies. But she is wonderfully cheerful, wonderfully cheerful. She has nothing to complain of.”

Although Wilde has been accused of merely doling out clever lines, without regard for character, this is clearly untrue. It is true perhaps of Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby, but this helps to establish the closeness of their relationship. They have much in common with each other and with their author, at least in the field of cleverness and aesthetics, although not in their moral characters or their lack of charity.
ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. A review of a recent production of A Woman of No Importance claimed “it suffers from an overbearing social conscience which drains the life blood from the dialogue and crushes the impact of its virulent message.”
   Consider this view of the play.

2. Remind yourself of the end of Act II, from Lord Illingworth’s speech beginning “So that is our son!” (page 44 in the Penguin edition) to the end of the Act.
   What is the importance of this extract in the context of the whole play?
   In your answer you should consider:
   - the ways that the relationship between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot is presented
   - the language used in this extract
   - the dramatic effects Wilde creates here

3. Oscar Wilde himself referred to A Woman of No Importance as ‘a woman’s play.’
   Consider this view of the play.

4. Remind yourself of the end of Act III from Gerald, “Dear mother, I am afraid I kept you waiting.” (page 67 in the Penguin edition) to the end of the Act. What is the importance of this extract in the context of the play as a whole?
   In your answer you should consider:
   - the presentation of Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot
   - the dramatic effects Wilde creates
   - the ways in which a Victorian audience might have responded to this extract

5. What does Wilde’s presentation of Hester Worsley tell an audience about Victorian upper class attitudes to America?

6. Remind yourself of the ending of the play, from Lord Illingworth, “Rachel, Gerald knows everything about you and me now … ” (page 87 in the Penguin edition) to the end.
   What is the importance of this extract in the context of the whole play?
   In your answer you should consider:
   - the ways that attitudes to marriage are presented here
   - the way in which language is used
   - the way in which Wilde creates dramatic effects

7. In a review of a recent American production of A Woman of No Importance Lord Illingworth was described as “the Wilde-like figure who spins all the brilliant bons mots turns out to be the fulcrum of the moral drama. His wit hits home, but he undercut it in ways that made him seem a gilded rotter.”
   Consider this view of Wilde’s presentation of Lord Illingworth.

8. Remind yourself of the extract at the end of Act I, between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby, beginning with Mrs. Allonby, “Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!” to the end of the Act.
   What is the importance of this extract in the context of the whole play?
   In your answer you should consider:
   - the way that the relationship between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby is presented
   - the way that language is used
   - the way that a Victorian audience might have responded to this extract