The first scene shows Lady Chiltern posed at the top of a large staircase greeting the guests. A tapestry representing Boucher's "Triumph of Love" hangs on the back wall. Sitting on a Louis Seize sofa, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon share the first conversation. Mrs. Marchmont declares that she has come to the soiree to be educated, and Lady Basildon replies that she abhors education. Mrs. Marchmont concurs but jestingly protests that their hostess—Lady Chiltern—is always urging her to find one "serious purpose" in life. Looking around the room—that is, both at the cast and audience—through her opera glasses, Lady Basildon notes that she hardly sees anyone whom one could call a serious purpose around here.

Act I similarly introduces its other players through such instances of banter, each new guest being announced by the butler Mason from the top of the stairs. Throughout this first scene, dialogue is occasionally punctuated by the malapropisms (the ludicrous misuse of words) of the Vicomte de Nanjac, a young anglophile whose awkward English serves as a comically distorted reflection of the group's polished repartee.

The following conversation involves Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert's sister, and the elderly Lord Caversham, father of Lord Goring. Caversham bemoans the idleness of his son and the excesses of London Society. Along with introducing the old-fashioned Caversham, this conversation offers a glimpse at Mabel's affection for the dandified lord.

Suddenly Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley—sporting scarlet lips, a heliotrope gown, Venetian red hair, and rather assertive fan—enter the room. Upon their introduction, Lady Chiltern reveals coldly that she knows Mrs. Cheveley from their school days, and Mrs. Cheveley, having spent many years in Vienna, all too sweetly expresses her eagerness to meet Sir Robert. Lady Chiltern assures her she has little in common with her husband and moves away.

After a comic interlude with de Nanjac ("Ah! You flatter me. You butter me, as they say here."), Sir Robert enters and meets Mrs. Chelevey. Mrs. Cheveley slyly reveals that she knows a man—Baron Arnheim—from Sir Robert's past. She also poses herself against the dreary demands of marriage (the London season, for example, is far too "matrimonial"; Arnheim traveled like Odysseus without the disadvantage of having a Penelope waiting for him, etc.).

Mason then announces Lord Goring, a witty and ironical dandy who, as the stage notes indicate, would be annoyed if considered romantic. Mrs. Cheveley precisely describes him as such upon discovering he is still a bachelor; apparently the two have met before. Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert exit, and Goring saunters over to Mabel Chiltern. The two exchange in flirtatious repartee; De Nanjac then kidnaps Mabel to the music room.

After a brief exchange with his father, Goring turns to Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont for a discussion of married life. Bemoaning the unendurable faultlessness of their husbands, Mrs. Marchmont comes to exclaim: "We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it." They then go on to gossip about the scandalous Mrs. Cheveley.

Analysis

As discussed in the Context, Wilde's later plays both mirror the conventional themes of the Victorian popular stage—such as loyalty, devotion, undying love, duty, respectability, and so on—and undermine them through their brilliantly choreographed banter. The first half of Act I consists almost entirely of this deceptively frivolous party talk.

Wilde's banter is written in witty, epigrammatic repartee. "Wit" is defined here as the quality of speech that consists in apt associations that surprise and delight; the epigram is a brief, pointed, and often antithetical saying that contains an unexpected change of thought or biting comment. The tone of the epigram is often "half-serious," playing on the potential for misunderstanding. Notably, Act I begins by declaring the absence of any serious purpose in the room; one could say that epigrammatic repartee is speech that refuses to speak seriously. Moreover, as this "half-serious" tone is often ironic, such repartee is often speech that the speaker does not speak in earnest either.

Rhetorically, the epigram is usually dependent on a combination of devices: the play between conventionally paired terms, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and paradox. Take then, for example, Lord Goring's rejoinder to his father, Lord Caversham, when the latter accuses him of talking about nothing: "I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about." At one level, Goring's epigram is sarcastic; at another, it is paradoxical, as one cannot know anything about nothing. The epigram also shifts between conventionally valorized terms: whereas most people would hope to have something substantive to talk about, Goring loves to talk about nothing.

Act I opens at a dinner party, and so we might note that repartee is only possible in social intercourse—what one might describe as the social theater. As members of London Society, Wilde's characters are extremely concerned with their "performances" at various gatherings and how they "look" in various social circles. As a result, their speech is very much part of their social personas—what we might call their "masks" or "poses." We will discuss masks (and unmaskings) in more detail as we go on. Mrs. Cheveley introduces the motif of social theatricality here when she declares that what Sir Robert describes as the "fashionable religions" of optimism and pessimism to be "merely poses"; of course, for Mrs. Cheveley, being natural is a pose as well.

Act I involves a number of conversations on gender as well. These conversations are crucial as one of the play's primary themes consists of varying conceptions of womanliness. Of particular note is a conversation between Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley that relates aestheticism and a certain vision of femininity. As discussed in the Context, aestheticism, a doctrine often abbreviated as a philosophy of "art for art's sake," insists on art being judged by the beauty of artifice rather than that of morality or reason. Beauty is irrational, artificial, amoral, terms conventionally associated with the feminine. Here Mrs. Cheveley poses woman as a sort aestheticist art object. She tells Sir Robert that while men can be analyzed, women are to be merely adored: herein lies their strength. Like art, they resist judgment according to rational or moral categories. They embody the irrational (or at least when well-dressed), and are thus powerful, perhaps even dangerous. Mrs. Cheveley herself is one of these dangerously well-dressed and irrational women.

Act I - Part Two - SUMMARY

As the other guests go to dinner, Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley return to the Octagon room. Shifting their conversation to more practical subjects, Mrs. Cheveley raises the issue of an Argentine Canal scheme, a development fiasco in which she has heavily invested on the advice of their mutual friend: the recently deceased Baron Arnheim. Sir Robert is about to deliver the report of his special investigative commission to the House of Commons unmasking the affair; Mrs. Cheveley insists that he must not only withdraw the report but lend his support to the scheme as well or suffer the consequences. Mrs. Cheveley is blackmailing him.

Mrs. Cheveley's power over Sir Robert is her knowledge of the secret of his fortune's origins. As a young secretary, Sir Robert sold a Cabinet secret to Arnheim that enabled him to invest in the Suez Canal before the government announced its own purchase; Mrs. Cheveley holds the incriminating letter in her possession. Thus, after a few hopeless attempts at resistance, Sir Robert agrees to exchange his support for the piece of evidence.

Sir Robert then exits, and the guests return. Mrs. Cheveley triumphantly announces to Lady Chiltern that she has succeeded in winning her husband's support for the canal scheme; moreover, she and Sir Robert share a secret together. Sir Robert arrives and announces Mrs. Cheveley's carriage, and the latter then sails out on his arm.

In the following exchange, Mabel Chiltern, bantering with Lord Goring, comes upon a diamond brooch—shaped like a snake with a ruby on its head—on the sofa. Enigmatically, Goring insists that it is also a bracelet. Coolly he takes the brooch, puts it in a green letter case, and replaces the case in his breast pocket. He then asks Mabel to keep his possession of the brooch secret and inform him if anyone comes to claim it. Apparently, he gave it to someone many years ago.

Once all the guests have exited, Lady Chiltern confronts Sir Robert on the topic of the canal scheme. Though Sir Robert ambiguously protests he has only made a politically necessary compromise, Lady Chiltern demands that he write to Mrs. Cheveley, withdraw his support, and never see her again. She implores him to remain her ideal husband or else confess any secret disgraces from his past so that they may begin to drift apart. Unable to confess his crime, Sir Robert complies, and the two declare their love for each other. Lady Chiltern exits; Sir Robert commands Mason to put out the lights, leaving the chandelier illuminating the "Triumph of Love" in the background.

Analysis

The second half of Act I introduces the play's primary theme—that of marriage—distributing a number of commentaries on married life among its various characters. We will begin with its heroes: the Chilterns.

Act I - Part Two

This section of Act I drastically shifts the tone of the play, moving from the banter of the dinner party to the Chilterns' maudlin confrontation. While the transition from dinner party is gradual, the encounter between the Chilterns' is ultimately so different—in both length and style—from the dialogue thus far as to constitute a new melodramatic "mode" on stage. Note the devices that make up their exchange: Lady Chiltern's lyrical entreaty to her ideal husband ("Oh! Be that ideal still"), Sir Robert's near-confession when Lady Chiltern implores the latter to reveal any past disgraces, the dramatic irony produced when she declares the past the means by which one judges others, and the apparent doom foretold when Lady Chiltern sorrowfully declares that she and a husband who had deceived her would necessarily drift apart. These devices serve to raise the suspense and tension of the exchange; from a party of clever and ironic wits we have moved to an intimate scene between two characters overcome with emotion. Unlike Wilde's inimitable banter, this dialogue directly borrows from the conventions of the Victorian popular stage.

Thematically this exchange addresses ideals of marriage, love, and morality, introducing the notion of the ideal husband. Here the conventionally melodramatic dialogue serves as vehicle for a similarly generic discussion of love. Tellingly, this discussion describes love in explicitly gendered terms. As a woman, Lady Chiltern loves Sir Robert as an ideal husband, a man worthy of worship for the example he sets privately and publicly. As a result, she cannot accept Sir Robert's protestations regarding the need for practical compromises; she will have her ideal spouse or none at all. Sir Robert will confront his wife on the dangers of idealizing one's lover in the following act.

Act I also places a critique of Lady Chiltern's severe sense of morality, however, in the mouth of the villainness, Mrs. Cheveley. Prior to the exchange between the Chilterns, Mrs. Cheveley ventures a biting critique of Victorian society, decrying its "modern mania for morality." Whereas scandals once lent charm to a politician, they now spell his ruin. Ultimately, of course, for Mrs. Cheveley it takes little more to assuage those of rigid morals than a few insipid homilies. As she remarks: "In modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin."

More humorously, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont mock the notion of the ideal husband while bantering with Lord Goring. Bemoaning unendurably ideal husbands as dreadfully dull, they declare themselves "martyrs" of married life. Their conversation thus perhaps ironizes Lady Chiltern's worship of her ideal mate and her imminent martyrdom as a deceived wife.

Finally, we should also note the introduction of two objects on stage: the letter that returns from Sir Robert's past and the diamond bracelet. Such lost, misplaced, and waylaid objects are also familiar devices from the Victorian stage, serving to complicate plot and produce moments of dramatic irony. We will return to these objects in more detail below.