

# CHARLES DICKENS' IS SHE HIS WIFE?: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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## Abstract

The paper aims to study Charles Dickens' play 'Is she His wife?' This is an illustration of hypocrisy, selfishness of Victorian time. Here, it is found that people practice ennui and boredom in their personal life. They pretend their feelings in vital relationship. The source of real pleasure vanishes from the life of Victorian people. Every one was trying to achieve materialistic satisfaction that is momentary. Dickens' criticises the wicked world in which norms & values of life disappeared. He has voiced it in his play. The play has characters like Mr. Alfred Lovetown & Mrs. Lovetown, Mr. Peter Limbury & Mrs. Limbury. This married couple feels unhappiness after a few months of their marriage. They start to conceal their sense of love & affection in their life. Some time they degrade themselves for some extent of false position in society. The tiresome and boring picture of married pairs are happened throughout the play. Some examples of confusing strata of living are also found, but the pair resolves everything and tries to reget happiness.

**Keywords:** Charles Dicken, Appraisal

## Brief

Charles Dickens is a very popular novelist of his time. The great master of humour wrote some plays also. The critics as S.J. Adair Fitzgerald, F. Dubreg Fawett and Robert Garis have studied him as a dramatist. Dickens is critically observed as a dramatist also. Sufferings of children, pitiful situation of working people are very much noticeable in his works. He acquires the corrupt materialistic Victorian society which makes him without realizing it a violent revolutionary. His works are marked with the spirit if humanitarianism & social reform with the steady progress of his art. It was not enough for him to show to his contemporaries, the humor and pathos of the life around him, but also to instruct them to make social amends and work for the betterment of human society. Dickens never advocated any specific means of reforms but indicated the way to the solution.

The play '*Is She His Wife?*' (1837) has focused Dickens' vision of life as well as society of England during Victorian time. The play portrays two married couples. They married recently but did not feel happiness. The play is a wonderful opportunity for actors to act reckless, overact and discuss matters. It follows the conventions of many theatre farces of the time, and strings together a series of contrived

coincidences and implausible misunderstandings. Audiences liked and expected such things, like all three of the St. James Theatre plays, the best part is the low comic character in this case; Felix Tapkins, a good example of one of Dicken's eternal optimists. The time wrote, "The plot bordered on the dangerous, but it was so dexterously and delicately managed that its success was decided." (Dexter, 254)

The play portrays two pairs of married couples. Mr. Alfred Lovetown and Mrs. Lovetown and Mr. Peter Limbury and Mrs. Limbury. Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown are happily married. They lead a peaceful domestic life in the beautiful natural surroundings. But a few months after the marriage, Mr. Lovetown feels tired of life in the country. He ceases to be "exquisite, good tempered, attentive husbands." (Dickens, 94), and has "little petty quarrels"(94) with his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown show temperaments opposite to each other and an element of the ludicrousness. Mr. Lovetown likes city life while Mrs. Lovetown has a liking for "green fields, and blooming hedges, and feathered songsters..." (93). It is not a marriage between two like-minded people but two unlike minded people, posing to be like-minded in order to impress each other. Their professed love for each other and appreciation of the very virtues which they disapprove of are over soon after matrimony.

Mrs. Lovetown, finding her husband's coldness and insensibility, thinks out a scheme to awaken dormant feelings of affection of her husband. She uses Mr. Felix Tapkins, a handsome young bachelor as an instrument for her project. In order to arouse her husband's jealousy, Mrs. Lovetown pretends to love her bachelor neighbour Mr. Tapkins. He is a neighbour to this couple. Further Tapkins leaves Lovetown, Mrs. Lovetown creates confusion. One afternoon Tapkins is expecting Mr and Mrs. Peter Limbury to his house but the latter calls on Lovetown in the morning just to inform him about their visit to Tapkins. Mrs. Lovetown's superficial relation is obvious:

*Have you not over and over again said that fortune and personal attractions were secondary considerations with you? That you loved me for those virtues which while they gave additional luster to public life. (93)*

Mr. Felix Tapkins appears. He is formerly an esquire of the India House, Leaden Hall Street, and Prospect Place, Poplar: but now of the Rustic Lodge near Reading. He is a bachelor. He asks about contradictory dispositions of Mr. and Mrs., Lovetown. Mrs. Lovetown is very much irritated with Mr. Lovetown in the company of Tapkins, when Mrs. Lovetown is alone, she takes about her scheme to rouse her husband's jealousy so as to remove his insensibility.

*I can bear Alfreds' coldness and insensibility no longer and come what may I will endeavour to remove it. From the knowledge I have of his disposition I am convinced that the only mode of doing so will, be by rousing his jealousy and wounding his vanity. This thoughtless creature will be a very good instrument for my scheme. (97)*

When Mrs. Lovetown is convinced that Mr. Tapkins already knows about the disturbed relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown, she declares her love for Mr. Felix "I esteem my husband,

to love another,"(98) She is fearful about this concealment. But it is obvious how she tries to keep her affairs concealed from her husband. Mr. Felix feels encouraged to declare that he also feels deep passion for Mrs. Lovetown:

*An individual, I may, perhaps, venture to say an estimable individual, who for the last three months has been constantly in your society, who never yet had courage to disclose his passion, but who burns to throw him your feet. ( 98)*

Mr. Tapkins throws himself on his knees and seizes Mrs. Lovetown's hand when Mr. Lovetown enters at this time; Tapkins immediately pretends to be diligently looking for something on the floor. Mr. Lovetown says that he is busy to write letters. Tapkins goes out with Mrs. Lovetown, Mr. Lovetown now suspects his wife's secret affairs with Mr. Tapkins and resolves to teach her a lesson:

*What's my wife to him, or he to my wife! Very extraordinary. I can hardly believe that even if he had the treachery to make any advances, she would encourage such a preposterous intrigue. She spoke in his praise at breakfast time, though - and they have gone away together to see that confounded horse. But stop, I must keep a sharp eye upon them this afternoon, without appearing to do so. (99)*

With the sudden visit of Mr. and Mrs. Limbury, Mr. Lovetown gets an idea to stop his wife and Mr. Felix to go ahead with their secret affairs, Mrs. Limbury is a fit person for this scheme, Mr. Lovetown feigns admiration for Mrs. Limbury: "How charming - how delightful how divine you look to-day." (100). Mr. Lovetown feigns love for Mrs. Limbury next "Allow me ... to say how devotedly, how ardently I love you. Suffer me to retain this hand in mine. Give me one ray of hope," (102). Mr. Lovetown is busy making love to Mrs. Limbury, who is all alone. In the meanwhile his wife Mrs. Lovetown enters and retires behind the screen. Mr. Lovetown's illicit affair with Mrs. Limbury is a comment on corruption and hypocrisy that characterized Victorian society:

*Nay, I will not rise till you promise me that you will take an opportunity of detaching yourself from the rest of the company and meeting me alone in Tapkins's grounds this evening. I shall have no eyes, no ears for any one but yourself. (102)*

Mrs. Lovetown feels shocked to learn of her husband's affairs with Mrs. Limbury. The disgraceful schemes of Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown do not materialize. Mr. Tapkins decides to acquaint Mr. and Mrs. Limbury with the real position of the case. He makes a significant announcement about Limbury and his wife:

*The confession I overheard about her marriage to another, I have been thinking that, after such a discovery, it would be highly improper to allow Limbury and his wife to meet her without warning, him of the fact. (103).*

Mr. Lovetown is well aware of his wife's extra marital affairs with Tapkins. However, he pretends ignorance. Here he wants to be sure about it:

*I made Mr. Peter Limbury's amiable helpmate promise to meet me here. I know that refuge for destitute reptiles is Tapkins's favorite haunt, and if he has any assignation with my wife, I have no doubt he will lead her to this place. I must conceal myself here, even at the risk of a shower of black beetles. (105)*

Mr. Lovetown is terribly angry with Tapkins who has almost upset his peaceful personal life with his wife. Mr. Lovetown is a hopeless libertine as Mr. Limbury understands. He can run away with any woman, he likes and can seduce her. He has seduced Mrs. Limbury:

*That atrocious Lovetown, that Don Juan multiplied by twenty, that unprecedented libertine, has seduced Mrs. Limbury from her allegiance to her lawful lord and master. He first of all runs away with the wife of another man and he is no sooner tired of her, than he runs away with another wife of another man. (107)*

Therefore the play offers Dickens's criticism of artificial Victorian life which is marked by boredom and ennui. Even in private personal life people observe pretension which ruins domestic happiness as it happens in respect of the two married couples portrayed in the present play. Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown and Mr. and Mrs. Limbury are the two couples. Mr. Lovetown's treatment of his wife is indefensible, unmanly and scandalous. He is almost dead to every sense of natural feeling and propriety. Mr. Limbury also is a jealous husband. Mrs. Lovetown and Mrs. Limbury have to feign love with others so as to excite feeling of warmth and tenderness in their life partners.

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