



# *AN INCONVENIENT WIFE*

## Readers' Guide

Warner Books

416 pages

ISBN 978- 0-446-52956-7

### Discussion Questions:

1. The life of a woman in the 19th C., especially among the upper class, was fairly constricted. As a product of that culture, were Lucy's actions justifiable? What part does culture play in dictating what is morally right? Does the concept of right change as culture changes? Should it? How would you have lived in that era? Could you have been happy as a woman then?
2. How much did Victor's patients and their husbands understand about his treatment? Do you think he deliberately misled them? If he did, was he right to do so? Why? Is there ever a time when such lying is justified?
3. Victor was on the cutting edge of scientific theory in the 19th C. He believed that one day the continent of the mind would be fully mapped. Most scientists feel they are on a quest to find the ultimate truth. Is there such a thing? Should a search for truth trump morality?
4. Did Victor plant the suggestion that Lucy murder her husband, and was she acting on that suggestion, or upon her own desires? Were those desires conscious or unconscious? What do you feel really happened?
5. Women's lives have changed a great deal since the late 19th Century. In what ways have women's lives not changed?
6. Do you think Lucy was truly ill? Why or why not? How much responsibility should Lucy take for her own behavior and illness?
7. William thought of Lucy as a child and thought of himself as a benevolent father. Do you feel this is a dynamic that can work in a marriage? How did Lucy take refuge in William's parental role?
8. Lucy calls her inability to stop or control her emotions a "flaw." Do you think it is? How do you think this "flaw" contributed to her dilemma and her cure?

9. Do you find Victor a likeable or sympathetic character? Why or why not? What about Lucy? William? Do you need to like characters to enjoy a book? Is there an ultimate villain in the story? Who is it? Why?
10. How does the opening quote by Carl Jung, about love being an elastic concept, relate to the theme of the story?
11. In the 19th C., men routinely dictated the course of women's lives. Is William morally wrong in dictating the path for Lucy? Do you believe he truly loves her? Do his manipulations show his love as real or unreal?
12. How does the historical detail of the period support the story? Could it have been set in another time and still have the same effect? How does the author use the historical detail to enrich and deepen the story?
13. Does William deserve his fate?
14. Does the book have a happy ending? Imagine Lucy's life after the novel. How does it unfold? What role will Victor play in that life? Is Lucy truly free at the end?
15. Women in the 19th C. were taught that passion was an evil in any form. What part does discovering passion play in Lucy's metamorphosis?

### **Author Interview:**

- What drew you to the era of America in the 1880s, and to the specific locale of New York City?

I have always found 19th C America fascinating. It was a time of vast change: intellectually, culturally, and scientifically. It was then that America moved from a rural nation to an industrialized world power. It was, in a sense, America's adolescence. What the United States' mandate would be, what would be its relevance to the rest of the world—those were the questions most Americans saw as crucial in determining the nation's future. Politically and artistically, people were looking for the answers.

If America was a nation of change, then New York City was at its core. It was the first city of the industrial age, with all the revolution and conflict that suggests. There was no other city in America at that time that was so dichotomized between the haves and the have nots, and because I was dealing with a story that required that dichotomy, it was the obvious setting.

- What kinds of historical sources did you consult for your information about medical practices and medical diagnoses of the 1880s, such as faradization, uterine monomania, ovariectomy, erotomania, the "water cure," electrotherapy?

Scientific research had a major cultural impact in the 19th C. Because science requires written proofs and documentations, there was no dearth of resources for the period. Most of my historical sources were original—scientific monographs, case studies, transcriptions of lectures, and books of medical technique and theories that were written by those who were teaching at the time, along with memoirs of both doctors and victims of 19th C medicine. Many of the case studies were truly horrifying. In the 19th C., mental illness was only beginning to be understood and women were primary test subjects. Some of the tracts were emotionally very difficult to read.

- The character of William Carelton (nee Brock) is clearly motivated by a desire to rise above his social class. After growing up in Newport, Rhode Island, watching the behavior of the wealthiest families who “summered” there, William gave up everything to break into their world. In light of William’s violent and dearly death, are you making the point that class societies are destructive?

I think class societies are ultimately destructive, in that those in the upper class begin to believe that wealth gives them the right to power and control, and that they are not only above the law themselves, but somehow mandated to dictate moral standards for the rest of the world. It establishes a culture of “want;” other classes begin to believe that “having” is the only way to be happy, and that leads to jealousy and anger, and to an unhealthy schadenfreude. One of the dangers of a class society is that those of one status are unable to truly understand or care about the needs and problems of another. Class distinctions are inherently prejudicial, and the worst sort of generalization—for those in every class. It’s divisive in all the worst ways.

- You clearly establish in this novel that the upper classes enjoyed advantages and privileges in every area of life. You then look more closely at the lives led by the women who belonged to the upper classes. You seem to be making the point that even upper class females in the 1880s were required to conform to a constricting definition of womanhood. What in your view was the worst feature of the feminine role in the 1880s?

In spite of the advantages accorded them by virtue of their status, women in the upper classes bore the brunt of society’s assumptions about and expectations for women. In many ways, the lack of money or prestige allowed women in the lower classes more freedom in terms of the roles they were expected to play—they didn’t have the luxury of conforming to any idealized vision of womanhood; just surviving was hard enough. Women in the lower classes had to work, to take on roles outside those of domesticity, and were forced by circumstance to find more equitable positions within their families and their neighborhoods. This doesn’t mean they weren’t suppressed or taken advantage of—they were. But they weren’t locked into the role that many upper class women found themselves having to play, as a domestic angel. For women at this time—all women—the inability to determine their own lives was the worst thing about being female. Opportunities for something more simply were not there. The culture kept them disenfranchised; imprisoned intellectually, physically and emotionally.

- The character of Lucy is forced to endure medical treatments which, by today’s standards, would be deemed anywhere from sexual harassment to sexual abuse to virtual rape.

Would you say that the males of the era misused their dominance in all fields—medicine in particular—to take unfair advantage both physically and psychologically of women?

Science has a habit of utilizing the most disenfranchised to achieve its ends, because the franchised won't permit themselves to be experimented with, and they aren't concerned enough about the disenfranchised to do anything more than justify the treatment of them. Men—particularly white European males—have historically been the dominant power in the western world, and I think they did and do take advantage of women. The debt that science, and in particular, medicine, owes to women is irredeemable.

- You show in a startling way how the sexual repression and Victorianism of the 1880s was affecting males, as well as females. Judging from William Carelton, and from Lucy's father, men considered sexual pleasure as something barbaric, animalistic and lewd. A married man was expected not to "defile" his wife, a husband was supposed to take his more base sexual urges either to a mistress or to a prostitute. Are you making the point that to some degree, males were also victims in the sexual repressiveness?

I think William was as much a victim of his time as Lucy was. Especially among the upper class and the educated, society dictated a certain role for women and an equally certain role for men, and that has always been true. William did love his wife, but he was a man of his times, and to be considered civilized meant adopting a certain kind of behavior. Culture dictated the way men and women behaved then as much as it does now.

- In the course of this novel, it becomes clear that by 1880s standards, a "good" woman experienced no base passions. A woman who did experience base desires was either a harlot or deranged. Is Dr. Victor Seth, who perceives that sexually frustrated women resort to hysteria to vent their urges, ahead of his time?

The Victorian era was one of confusion and instability. Westerners were breaking away from what had been heretofore a clergy-based culture where religion dictated morality. As scientific theories such as evolution created a fissure in many religious-based belief systems, people began turning to science for moral guidance—which is how theories such as Social Darwinism evolved. The laity began to rely on social scientists to determine how people should behave, but these scientists were often untrained, popular theorists only. At this time, many doctors were coming to believe that sexual frustration was dangerous emotionally and physically, but the theory flew in the face of social science and its accompanying morality, and so it was not listened to or accepted. Dr. Seth was like these men: true scientists who trained in the new techniques of laboratory science. He was not so much ahead of his time as he was one of a growing minority.

- At times, Dr. Victor Seth seems to be motivated only by the pure quest for scientific knowledge. At other times, Dr. Seth seems to chafe inside the strictures of his own background: he comes from an immigrant family; he is a Jew; his family is lower middle class. Are we to infer that Dr. Seth's treating mostly wealthy, upper class women is partly

motivated by his desire to gain entrance to their world of privilege? William invites Dr. Seth to clubs, to cultural events, to toney parties, and Dr. Seth, albeit through the back door, does seem to be gaining some acceptance by High Society.

Victor Seth is a conflicted character. I think his background makes him as susceptible as William was to envy, and I think that he saw privileged women as a way to gain fame for himself, and along with that, credence as a true scientist. Victor wears a lot of masks—he hides and downplays his background at the same time he disdains those who would disdain it. Essentially, however, he suffers from what we would today call an inferiority complex. He looked for acceptance not just to the scientific community, but to the community he wanted desperately to look to him for answers. Victor was a man who disdained any club that would have him as a member, even as he desperately wanted not just to belong to the club, but also to lead it.

- You clearly have researched hypnosis as practiced in the 1880s, since you mention such real-life figures as Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) and Hippolyte Bernheim (1840-1919). Is it fair to say that the phenomenon of hypnosis has a major influence upon the characters' behaviors in this novel?

Hypnosis at the time was a new treatment. While the general populace saw it essentially as a kind of metaphysical science, along the same lines as mesmerism or spiritualism, it was coming to be considered a useful tool, especially in France, though its limitations were little understood. Most neurologists who specialized in the burgeoning science of psychology in this era used it to some extent. Freud used it at the beginning of his career. The doctors who condemned it were the doctors who believed it gave a doctor too much power over his patient—the ability to be a God. In the novel, it is that idea that drives Victor. It was a way for him to control those who would control him. For Lucy, hypnosis became a way for her to rationalize and justify her greatest desires. I enjoyed juxtaposing our current knowledge of hypnosis, and the fact that one cannot be hypnotized into doing something one wouldn't normally do, with the knowledge of the 19th C., which was that it was a form of mind control. It added a dimension to Lucy's behavior that I found interesting.

- On the subject of hypnosis in this novel, you show Dr. Victor Seth hypnotizing guests at summer parties in Newport Beach, and we have no doubt that these unsuspecting subjects truly succumb to hypnotic trances. In the case of Lucy Van Berckel Carelton, she at first is clearly controlled by Dr. Seth's hypnotic suggestions; however, as time goes on and she and Dr. Seth start having an affair, do you intend Dr. Seth's control over Lucy to begin to come into question?

At the beginning, Lucy is susceptible to hypnosis simply because she wants someone to take control of her emotions and make them socially acceptable. But as she finds freedom within hypnosis, and begins to understand what her real desires are, she finds power. Victor's control over Lucy starts to wane almost the moment she finds satisfaction in their affair, when she begins to understand that she's the only one who can make her own happiness and take charge of her future.

- When William surprises Lucy and Dr. Seth on the beach at Newport, William seems to be looking for way to save face, to preserve his dignity, and also to guarantee that Lucy remain his wife. Lucy, after all, is William's ticket into not only wealth but also the upper classes. If Lucy were to end their marriage, William would be cast out. Therefore, is William's main reason for committing Lucy to Beechwood Grove to keep her from divorcing him?

Divorce was hard to obtain at the time, though it was obtainable. William was afraid of losing the status he'd worked so hard to gain, because he knew that if Lucy left him—even if she didn't divorce him—he would lose that status. He also saw that Lucy seemed willing to throw everything away, and that kind of scandal would destroy them both, and she didn't seem to care about being destroyed. So it was really William's way of gaining control over a situation he had clearly lost control over. He wanted Lucy to be well, but that wellness was so alien to him that he had no context within which to think of it—he had no other choice but think of it as a serious illness, as madness. Good women didn't behave the way Lucy was behaving. He had to rely on his societal role, and to custom, to save them both.

- After Lucy shows William her sketches in Chapter 14 and he forces her to destroy them, she tracks down Dr. Seth in his home and they become lovers in Chapter 16. Lucy seems genuinely in love with Dr. Seth at this point, yet we also know that Dr. Seth has established many avenues of hypnotic control over Lucy. Do you intend there to be an ambiguity as to whether Lucy freely loves Dr. Seth or is hypnotically induced to love Dr. Seth?

As Seth says in the novel, it is not uncommon for patients to fall in love with their doctors, especially in a milieu where one is telling one's doctor one's deepest secrets. In psychological terms, this is called transference, and, given his background and training, Seth certainly knows that such feelings exist. He is, of course, using those feelings to his advantage, and his goal is to remake Lucy and to use passion as a tool in that endeavor. I think the truth is that it's a little of both—how much of Lucy's love is based on real feeling, and how much is Seth's control is up for debate—just as all love is. It's a mysterious feeling; where it comes from, how real it is, how it changes and molds behavior. It's as Jung says: "love is an elastic concept."

- At times, it seems as though you portray Dr. Victor Seth as an amazingly progressive mind. Whereas a man like William covets the lifestyle of the upper class, Dr. Seth has contempt for many of its conventions. Dr. Seth writes in his journal (in Chapter 4) that "Mrs. C suffers from the usual malady of her class: spoiled, self-indulgent ennui." In Chapter 5, Dr. Seth worries in his journal that he might never achieve scientific credibility if his only test patients are "upper class neurasthenics... My peers can only feel the same contempt for my patients that I do..." He complains that his experiments are performed on those who suffer from self-indulgent invalidism. Do you intend to portray Dr. Seth as ahead of his time?

Because most doctors at this time were male, many of them downplayed or trivialized the emotional problems of the women they treated. Invalidism among the upper class, along with

hysteria and neurasthenia, was epidemic at this time. Dr. Seth certainly shares with other doctors his contempt of his own patients, and—in his view—their self-made problems. Male doctors had little understanding of the female mind and body, and were hampered by a cultural bias that portrayed women as a lower rung on the evolutionary scale. Many doctors believed that women were incapable of intellectual pursuits, that the energy required by their ovaries and uterus demanded all their resources. There was simply no energy left for intellectualism, and if women did indulge, it could have no other outcome than insanity. Because few lower class women had the time or resources to give into hysteria or invalidism, it did seem like an upper class disease, and doctors were not sympathetic—these women had everything, why shouldn't they be happy? Most doctors did not see through this surface prejudice, even when they diagnosed the problem as ennui, to the deeper truth—that these women were unhappy, that they felt caged, and that their boredom and unhappiness was evidencing itself in real symptoms of physical and mental illness. I wouldn't say that Seth was any more progressive than other doctors who routinely treated these women. In his quest to remake Lucy, Dr. Seth stumbled upon an answer most doctors—including himself—would never have considered: that a woman might have hopes and ambitions other than those society determined for her, that removing her from her prescribed role might alleviate her unhappiness. I wouldn't describe Seth as progressive so much as daringly opportunistic.

- You create in Lucy Van Berckel Carelton a female who clashes with her historical era. Lucy is passionate about art, about poetry, about the city of Rome; her social class demands that she be “biddable,” and that her only goals be hearth, home, motherhood and wifedom. Are you making the point that there is no absolute standard or formula for happiness? In Lucy's being dissatisfied with a life that most women of her time would envy, does this prove that every individual human being must forget his own personal version of happiness?

One of the biggest mistakes of the women's rights movement in the 1970s was the leaders' inability to realize that many women did not want to go out and find jobs. They wanted to be domesticated; they wanted to spend time with their children. They were as imprisoned by requirements that they pursue their dreams outside of the home as were the women who were denied the opportunity to do so. At that time, women who pursued careers were thought of as unfeeling, less feminine. Today, women who want to stay home with their children are thought of as unfortunates who don't know enough to know they should be pursuing some other kind of dream. In our world, we allow society and culture to dictate what should make us happy; we look for formulas, for the ultimate answer. There is no ultimate answer. Happiness is about accepting who you are, accepting and utilizing your talents to the degree you want to do so, and understanding when others do not choose to follow your path—because their path is different. Understanding is the key to happiness. I don't think it can be prescribed.

- To the modern female reader, it might be difficult to imagine a time when all women were relegated to a limited role, with limited vistas. You describe how a normal, sane person (Lucy) can be driven almost to madness by being caged, trapped in a role which stifles all her natural impulses, deprived of exercising any of her natural talents. Are you attempting

to jog the minds of your contemporary readers so that we can see how much progress women have made since 1880?

I was of the generation of women whose mothers were just beginning to be pulled out of their old roles and into a new world. When I was a small child, it was a given that women stayed home with their children, and men supported the family. By the time I was a teenager, that assumption was no longer true. My daughters are of the generation who believe that the whole world is open to them. They cannot conceive of a time when women were second class citizens, when they were kept firmly in their sphere. I expect, when they grow older, they will come firmly up against prejudice they don't even see coming. It is vastly important that women remember the sacrifices of those who came before them. It's important that we not forget our history. There are still deep, inbred prejudices against women in many spheres. If we aren't vigilant, we can allow the strides we've made to be eased away without our realizing it. Societies have a way of curbing power when it's gained. Cultures control. You can see it now in our culture's lack of support for stay-at-home moms. It's curtailing freedom, persecuting those we feel don't conform. Women should never forget who they are and where they come from. It's only through understanding the past that we can move into the future.