

**WEARING THE MASK OF EARNESTNESS: EXPLORING THE
ARTIFICIAL LIFE IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF
BEING EARNEST***

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to present how reality and fiction intersect in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* to challenge, if not subvert, social obligations and perception of identity in Victorian society. In so doing, the paper critically attempts to touch upon the concepts of duality and appearance as they possess the utmost importance for the Victorian sense of morality. The article also strives to show how Wilde undermines the basis of the truthful representation of gender identity instead of the Victorian perception of the term. In the play, as the paper argues, Wilde hints at the idea that there is a difference if we can call it a duality of identity between the appearance and what is hidden beneath. In the case of the fictional characters, they wear fake identities or imagine a view of identity to suit the public's expectations, challenging the perception of stable autonomous identity that the Victorian believed. However, the inner and outer worlds of the characters are pretty different from inside and outside, so that they constantly +vacillate in-between these identities. The paper concludes that, as Wilde hints, it is impossible to define a person fully when they display various identities simultaneously as in the modern sense.*

Keywords: Duality, Appearance, Gender, Identity, the Victorian Society

It would probably be not an overstatement when one would claim Oscar Wilde to be one of the most successful and well-known Irish playwrights of nineteenth-century English literature. His exceptionally witty remarks on everyday subjects and striking appearance would dazzle everyone around him, as well as his readers. Having written in different genres, Wilde is mainly known for his plays, such as *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1899). The last play he penned was *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895),

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with the subtitle “*A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*.” The play was a big success when it was premiered in 1895 and appreciated by Victorian society and the audience. It promoted a good deal of humour and entertainment to get the people out of their boredom and confusion in the late nineteenth century. However, it is also an irony that, at the same time, *The Importance of Being Earnest* brought about Wilde’s downfall in a couple of months. Later, he was sentenced to prison for two years due to his homosexuality that was strictly considered immoral in the relentlessly religious Victorian society. Wilde points out that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comedy. Through comedy, he creates many satirical standpoints about the Victorian lifestyle and codes of conduct to mock the trivialities of every life, such as family, marriage, love and the idea of being earnest in the nineteenth-century English society because Victorian people strove to show how important they were, how vital morality was, even though these aspects of life has lost much of their importance in life due to dramatic social, cultural, political, economic and scientific developments in the nineteenth century.

This paper attempts to present how reality and fiction intersect in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a way to challenge, if not subvert, social obligations and the meaning of identity in Victorian society. First, the paper tries to touch upon the concepts of duality and appearance as they possess the utmost importance for the Victorian sense of morality. Secondly, the article also strives to show how Wilde undermines the truthful stable representation of identity instead of the Victorian perception of identity. As the paper argues in the play, Wilde tries to illuminate the idea that there is a difference if we can call it a duality between the appearance and what is hidden beneath. In the case of the fictional characters, they wear fake identities or imagine a view of identity to suit the public’s expectations, challenging the perception of stable autonomous identity that the Victorian believed. However, characters are quite different inside and outside as they constantly vacillate in-between these identities. Wilde implies that it is impossible to define a person fully when they display various identities simultaneously as in the modern sense.

The Irish playwright, his full name Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, was born in 1854 to a wealthy family in Dublin, Ireland. His father was a famous eye surgeon, and his mother was a poet who wrote many nationalistic works under the pseudo-Speranza. Hence, Wilde had many opportunities to be around influential aristocratic people and a social atmosphere (Fenge, 2016). He attended prestigious schools and developed his sense of art and style separate from the established Victorian notion and morality. Wilde lived in the last decades of the Victorian era in Britain. As Gultekin (2016) suggests, it was the era of many contradictions that coexisted with developments and changes such as industrialism, the influx of people from the rural areas to the cities, the growth of metropolitan cities, as well as Sigmund Freud’s “Theory of Unconscious” and Charles Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* on the one hand and with moral corruption, materialism, and poverty on the other.

Industrialisation had an immense social and economic impact on people’s lives, and it boosted urbanisation by which people travelled from villages to cities in search of jobs and new lives. Owing to the new fields of employment and then trade, the middle-class became more affluent and grew in number, making itself more effective in the social and economic spheres of the Victorian era. Therefore, the rapid and unusual changes in the fields of economy, science, and politics created several new advancements in the society which conceived strict moral codes known as the “Victorian morality” based on the values such as

truthfulness, personal responsibility, duty and solid ethical manners (Erturk, 2010, p. 1). People were searching for money, and the capitalist system made society chase after utilitarianism that lacked human emotion and love for beauty in the world. As opposed to this common belief in Victorian society, a different art style, called “aestheticism”, emerged as a way artistically to mock conventional Victorian moral values and the notion of usefulness in a manner that had no relevance to the age of radical developments and changes.

Aestheticism, in short, can be defined as “the perception or appreciation of beauty” (Purchase, 2006, p. 37). However, Victorian society gave so much importance to its strict moral codes, ethics and observable facts that it ignored the feelings and desires of the people, hence lost the beauty and the essence of humanity in art. Therefore, writers such as Ruskin, Pater and Wilde refused this kind of Victorian ideals and instead elevated the aesthetic movement that promotes the idea of “art for art’s sake” – an artistic movement coined by the French Philosopher Victor Cousin in the early nineteenth century that focuses on the self-expression of an artist who creates a creative literary work. Ruskin, one of the key figures of the aesthetics movement, regarded the beauty of art as an essential point but stressed that art should be moral and benefit society. However, according to Sean Purchase (2006), Pater disagreed with Ruskin and emphasised that art should be free from such obligations as teaching and serving the ideals of “usefulness” and truthfulness in art (p. 38).

Pater’s notion of art profoundly influenced Wilde, and he too refused to impose the Victorian moral codes of conducts on his art. In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Wilde declared his idea of art by pointing out “[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things”, and he also touched upon Pater’s emphasis that art is not a ‘useful’ tool to convey morality and Victorian attitudes, stating that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or immoral book [...] All art is quite useless” (Greenblatt et al., 2005, p. 1698). Hence, by highlighting art’s functions, such as beauty, Wilde supported the creativity and “aestheticism” in art and challenged Victorian art’s dogmatic and rigid realism. Erturk (2010) draws attention to the fact that Wilde believed in reaching higher ethics through art free from the shallowness, hypocrisy and dullness of Victorian morality, stressing that the human soul should be independent of the pressures of “hypocritical Victorian ethics” that solidified art (p. 16). Therefore, Wilde was writing to free the people’s minds from the shackles of the Victorian way of thinking, even though his works were regarded as immoral and corrupt due to his way of living and artistic creation.

Wilde’s well-known plays known as ‘Society Comedies’, both amusing and criticising the audience at the same time, brought him great fame and success on the London stage in the 1890s (Sammels, 2004, p. 111). According to Barbara Belford (2000), his plays were so thoughtful and well written that “he changed the sound of laughter” and even competed with the works of Shakespeare and Moliere (p. ix). He was acclaimed for his unusual style and witty mind. Still, he was also notorious for his extravagant lifestyle and challenging personality as in the case of his homosexuality that he did not conceal from the public. However, it was an offence during his years. He did pay the price for his unique lifestyle, but he never accepted the Victorian way of thinking and the realism of Victorian art. He rejected the idea that art imitates life because then it would have to display only outward materialistic aspects of life and character while avoiding the sufferings around and aesthetic representation; therefore, Wilde portrayed art as superior to life which maintained the

aesthetic beauty and morality in the world, enabling people to become free and heal their minds and souls (Gultekin, 2016). Hence, Wilde maintained that life imitates art and to attain morality and that art and artists should be free from the social conventions and expectations of a given society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he features these ideals and challenges, if not subverts, Victorian ethics via exposing the puritan realism and artificial lives of his time.

Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, opens in the house of Algernon Moncrieff, an idle young man from the upper class in England. Later, his friend Earnest visits him and sees his cousin Gwendolen, who he loves and wants to propose to her for marriage. As the events gradually unfold, we learn that Earnest is named Jack, and he creates an imaginary brother called Earnest to come to the city and see Gwendolen. Afterwards, Algernon also admits that he has a fictional friend named Bunbury, who he visits when he wants to avoid specific family gatherings. After a series of events, such as Lady Bracknell's refusal to Earnest's proposal to marry her daughter and Algernon's pretending to be Earnest to meet Cecily, the play gets tangled and reaches a climax. However, everything is eventually resolved when they find out that Jack is Earnest, Algernon's long-lost brother. The story ends happily as both couples are free to marry.

As Sammells (2004) points out, style for Wilde is significant when he is composing his art as he believes it is the "aesthetic choices governing the ways we see the world, the ways we represent it, and the ways we present ourselves to it" (p. 111). This is also clear from his title for his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* as he is using the pun, the wordplay, to give multiple interpretations to the title and the play. Kupske and Sauza (2015) state that appearance and respectability were above everything else in Victorian society. Moreover, the "earnestness" of people to be seen as severe perfectly was the most critical norm in their community because outside factors and society's standards forced them to work in a deterministic way. They further emphasise that if people had other "affairs outside marriage" or maintained "secret" lives, society would condone it as long as they kept a good appearance to the outside world (p. 120). Wilde presents this hypocrisy and artificiality through the words of his characters in the play. Gwendolen is a good representation of this type as she says: "We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals [...] and my ideal, has always been to love someone of the name of Earnest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence" (Wilde, 1895, p. 83). Here, Gwendolen does not give importance to her future husband's character as long as he appears honest or morally good; she only cares for his appearance as hinted by his name; she is not aware that the appearance does not guarantee one's goodness and seriousness. Through his representation of Gwendolen and her view of a husband, Wilde artistically mocks the superficiality and the triviality of the Victorian ideals of husband and ethics of marriage that entail rigid expectations and perceptions of the ruling class (Cave, 2006). Gwendolen thinks that marrying somebody with the name "Earnest" will provide her with a social ladder and acceptance in society as appearance is the most crucial feature to follow in her community. As in the play, this notion is common both in the city and the country as Cecily, Jack's ward staying in the country, says: "[I]t had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Earnest [...] I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Earnest (p. 114). The obsession over the name "Earnest" gives a picture of another shallow and vacuous Victorian values that dull Victorian women's minds and make them believe that what they think and do

is the right way. In the quotation above, Wilde pities the narrow-mindedness of people, mainly women, who only care about the facade of their society. At the same time, they ignore what is important in life – inner beauty, feeling, passion, love and character. The way women think and act in such a way derives from the fact that the morally strict Victorian society constructs a perception of gender identity for women who cannot get rid of what they are taught. But what is strange is that women are ignorant of such silly and trivial behaviours in their life. The Victorian society plays with them without making them notice it.

In the play, Wilde also continues to ridicule the Victorian lifestyle and morality by creating a new term called “Bunburying”, which “means to invent a fictitious character” to avoid certain circumstances or attain a chance to act as one pleases (Reinert, 1956, p. 17). When Jack admits that he creates a brother named Earnest to come to the city whenever he wants, Algernon also confesses by saying: “I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, so that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose (p. 77). The quotation suggests that inventing double identities such as “Bunburying” and keeping diaries all the time can result in trivial life events and become a sign of revolting against the authoritative set of morals that shaped the identity in Victorian England (Flanagan, 2014, p. 123). Moreover, Jack and Algernon also consider these fictional characters as something that can be killed right away on behalf of their sins and immorality as Jesus sacrificed himself for humanity. Hazra (2013) argues that many people led double lives in England during the Victorian period to keep a decent appearance to create a free space for themselves in the public place. For example, Algernon and Jack want to escape the heavy burden of duty and social expectations imposed on them against their wish. Still, they also stay in the safe zone of social respectability by oscillating between one form of identity without being exposed to any restriction. Therefore, this attitude causes a division between the public and private spheres and space to act as freely as possible. This kind of representation demonstrates that Wilde not only conveys this hypocrisy and superficial morality of Victorian society through the views and acts of his characters perceptively in his last and most appreciated play, but he also creates a space for his characters to act therein and move freely between two opposing borders of their lives without being subjugated to the restriction of the Victorian morality.

Moreover, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde keeps on mocking the Victorian values of marriage, in which young people were not given any chance to voice their views concerning their marriage, but their parents arranged everything. Lady Bracknell may be assumed to be a villain as she disapproves of Jack’s proposal to her daughter and initially comes between Algernon and Cecily as well. When she hears that Jack and Gwendolen are engaged, she initially responds: “Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone [...] An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant” (p. 85). As Shabir (2020) indicates in his article, the constitutional marriage would often be in parents’ approval in the Victorian period regardless of the young people’s consent. The same can be observed in the play when Gwendolen is not given the privilege to choose the person to marry because her mother must approve of the candidate first. Hence, the pursuit of marriage becomes the mission of the mothers in this society as one of the typical characteristics of a patriarchal society that does not allow young people, particularly girls, to follow up their way of life and their own choice.

Huggins (2000) argues that women during Victorian England, especially mothers, had the control of ruling “the private sphere acting as gatekeepers, regulating family activities” (p. 588), while their husbands were involved in the public realm with outside activities since space was also gendered in nineteenth-century England. Therefore, Lady Bracknell symbolises the Victorian ideals of gender roles, dealing with domestic issues and family matters. For this reason, she undertakes the job of interviewing Jack (Earnest) in an attempt to find out his intentions with her daughter. She first starts by asking whether he smokes or not, and when Jack says yes, she in return gladly says, “[a] man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is” (p. 86). Hence, she comically considers smoking as an occupation, concluding that he is not a wanderer if one smokes. Later, when she learns that Jack has lost both her parents, she responds: “That seems like carelessness [...] try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent” (pp. 88-90). This quotation illuminates that the interview details how Lady Bracknell responds to Jack, becoming interested only in his social position and financial background (Bennett, 2015). She does not care so much for Jack’s personality or righteousness but silly demands such as having an occupation and producing a parent from himself. As Raby (1997) acknowledges, marriage is regarded as an economic activity in the Victorian period. It was believed that a woman secures wealth and a good position in society and does not care if the husband is loyal. Hence, it seems that Victorian moral values such as earnestness and ethical norms aim to suit society’s expectations. At the same time, it gives little importance to their existence and character as long as the appearance is well-presented. According to Erturk (2010), by portraying Lady Bracknell in such a way, Wilde belittles Victorian values and criticises social ethics and hypocrisy among Victorian people. They demand high moral manners by cherishing people’s appearance solely. Wilde cleverly mocks the hypocritical Victorian society and its values and emphasises that they do not practice what they preach.

The Importance of Being Earnest may also be considered a playground of contradictions as Wilde scatters conflicting thoughts throughout its narrative. Initially, starting from its subtitle “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People”, he presents implicit messages to his audience. Cave (2006) suggests that the characters who are supposed to be serious, as the title declares, are more seen as silly and do trivial things. This fact reveals that they are unaware of their absurdity, making the play funnier with laughter that would last longer. Hence, we may alter the subtitle and say “a serious comedy for trivial people”, making more sense. Throughout the play, the role of women seems to be superior to men as opposed to the characteristics of the Victorian age in England. Typically, as Mitchell (2009) points, the husband in the house has legal and economic control over his family where the women are secondary in position. However, in the play, Gwendolen appears as an outspoken woman, and thus she demands whatever she wants. For instance, she expects a decent proposal from Jack, and then Gwendolen tells him: “you haven’t proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage” (p. 84). Here, Gwendolen is represented as one who is in complete control of her life and thus directs Jack as she pleases.

Furthermore, when Cecily and Gwendolen meet in the play, Gwendolen mentions his father, Lord Bracknell. She says: “home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man [...] once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties, he becomes painfully effeminate” (p. 116). By representing female characters in such a way, Wilde disparages the gender identity and roles

that a patriarchal society in general and Victorian community cherished most. The quotation suggests a shift of perception in the society as to the gender identity in which women gain more power to decide their own life. Gwendolen considers home a proper place for the man. She suggests totally against patriarchal norms that strictly gender the home, seen as the woman's 'adequate sphere, whereas the outside area is allocated to the man. Wilde's critical treatment of gender roles in such an artistic and comical way may be read as a reminder to the Victorian society that there is no need to struggle to keep the traditional values intact anymore because the world is not the same as before. Hence, the reversals and paradoxes employed in the play make the audience alert. As Evan Thienpent (2004) mentions, judgements and questions arise in people's minds, and the wit and laughter appear together with a severe conception after watching the play. In this way, Wilde successfully creates a performative and self-representative space, making the Victorian community aware of outworn traditional ideals.

At the end of the play, Wilde claims that "life imitates art", as he also puts forward in his critical dialogue *The Decay of Lying*: "[l]iterature always anticipates life. It does not copy it but moulds it to its purpose" (p. 934). This aspect of art is seen in the representation of Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as she meets Algernon and becomes engaged in the imaginary world that she creates in her diaries. She says to Algernon: "we have been engaged for the last three months" when they have just met (p. 112). Since she cannot lead her life as she pleases herself, she invents an imaginary world and life as in Maxim Gorky's short story *Her Lover* (1917), in which "Gorky endows his fictional character Teresa with the Romantic energy which enables her to survive her misery and loneliness by inventing an imaginary lover" (Gunes, 2013, p. 102) so that her diaries and the writing form becomes as a way of living that is transformative for Cecily. She then eventually receives her happy ending, just like her fantasy. The play ends when Jack discovers that he is named 'Earnest' and telling the truth all the time. He apologises to Gwendolen: "Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?" (Wilde, 1985, p. 144). Again, Jack's apology for being honest and telling the truth all the time can be read as a way to satirise Victorian formality and duplicity. Furthermore, Wilde ends the play with Jack's famous line: "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (p. 144). Again, it seems that "life imitate[s] art" as Jack becomes the exact person that he creates; he becomes Earnest and receives a brother just like one in his fiction.

Jack's realisation of the importance of being Earnest is another Wilde's wordplay, and it presents an ambiguous meaning to the reader. According to Flanagan (2014), it is not the invented doubles that die at the end of the play, but it is their true identities as Jack becomes Earnest and Algernon, his foolish brother. And he further claims that they both earn the epithet 'earnest' as they marry into Victorian society. It may be stated that the end of the play carries autobiographical elements, representing Wilde's own life as he once said, "[s]ome said my life was a lie, but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple" (cited in Holland, 1997, p. 3). Wilde was a witty and successful author mirroring his society from a critical stance and anticipating social transformations that are likely to follow later. His following lines once again declares that art is the way to attain freedom and beauty. By being "earnest," you are true to yourself and accept everything that comes with it.

In conclusion, in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses his wit and style beautifully to criticise and mock the codes of conduct of the Victorian society that give importance to people's appearance, ignoring what is beneath – love, passion, and feeling that enables an artist to achieve the aesthetic beauty. He also rejects the notion that art is a tool to teach morality and manipulate people's minds concerning ethics and manners, as in Victorian society. On the contrary, he regards art as superior to life and claims that art must be free from rigid norms and social conventions to have beauty in life. In his time, his radical and critical tone, therefore, earned his works a "fame" to be considered immoral and corrupt as they did not comply with the standard Victorian formation; however, Wilde suggests that if a mirror existed in art, it would reflect its audience and the corrupt people would see the corruption, and the moral would see the beauty (Erturk, 2010). Through his last play and characters, Wilde emphasises that Victorians rarely realised the essence of reality and meaning but just emphasised the triviality and the superficiality of things. Instead of "art imitating life," Wilde maintains that it is indeed the other way around, and this assertion is exactly evident in his personal life when he was found dead in a cheap French hotel, recalling his last and well-loved play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As he was earnest about his life and work, he also died as one of the fewest 'Earnest' of his time.

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