

**The Duality of Human Nature in Oscar Wilde's
The Importance of Being Earnest**

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Abstract

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1856-1900), the Irish poet and writer, was popular for his dramatic portrayals of the human conditions in the Victorian age, in the late nineteenth century. He became famous, especially when citizens of Britain were able to embrace and appreciate literature. He wrote many poems, short stories, and plays. In his writings he criticized the Victorian society for its negative features, like hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, double-standards, sexual repression, and class-consciousness. Wilde criticized the Victorians in his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*, especially its social aristocratic life, the social class system, the attitudes of marriage, and the duality of human nature.

This paper is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one deals with an introduction about Oscar Wilde and the Victorian age as a new age which was converted from rural into urban. Also, it sheds light on the Victorian women and their role in that society. Section two tackles the *The Importance of Being Earnest* and its genre. Moreover, this section analyzes the double identity of human nature in the Victorian age, and the reason behind this duality.

1.1 Introduction

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) won a scholarship in 1875 to go to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he took his lessons in Greek and Roman history, literature, and philosophy. He became famous for his wit, charm, and conversation prowess. Wilde undergraduated under the influence of John Ruskin* and Walter Pater** (Jackson, 1980: xii). According to Wilde's readers, he was the leader of the aesthetic movement***, a disciple of Pater and its effect was particularly felt on Wilde who paid tribute to him in *The Critic as Artist* (1891) (Cazamian and Vergnas, 1964: 1275-76).

As a young man, he made a name for himself through the intense and refined audacity of his clothes, his taste, his language; his gifts of satirical wit and epigram thus lent his talent a drawing-room and rather superficial character. However, the sharpness of his delineations, and his biting verve, already revealed a born writer of superior merit (Ibid.).

Wilde tried several kinds of writing like poetry, novel, drama, and essay. Cazamian and Vergnas comment on his way in writing his plays. They state:

(*) John Ruskin (1819-1900) was the leading English art critic of the Victorian age, an art patron, draughtsman, and social thinker. His social view concerns issues of citizenship, and notions of the ideal community (http://www.pilates.ekoregion.biz.pl/?pilates=John_Ruskin).

(**) Walter Horatio Pater (1839-1894) was an English essayist, critic of art and literature, and writer of fiction (<http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Author:Walter-Horatio-Pater>).

(***) Aesthetic Movement is the philosophy of the beautiful in nature, art, and literature which concentrates on aesthetic values rather than moral or social themes (Holman and Harmon, 1986: 5).

Wilde's plays are remarkably successful, and stand out through their exceptional merit against the almost unrelieved mediocrity of theatrical production for a whole century. His comedies have a rapid and brilliant animation; their dialogue shows the easy flow of the traditional French manner; the plots are cleverly wrought; the comic characters, mere sketches most of them, lay no claim to depth.... [Yet], Wilde had [in his comedies] to write problem plays, with a frankly destructive aim; confronted with the resistance and the fears of public, he toned down his themes, thinned out the substance of his works, wound up his plots so as to please the shallow taste of the audience (1276-77).

Wilde's writing was dominated by the relation between life and art. This explains his mockery against the negative aspects of the society.

Liam Brophy (1947: 63) said that Oscar Wilde did not use his talent for literature but for living. Jacques Maritain, the French Catholic philosopher and political thinker, has well said, "To put in his life, not in his work, his genius as an artist, nothing could be more absurd than this design of Wilde; it is to carry over into a flute the art of the cithara*, into a bird the law of the snow. His life was only a useless phrase" (Ibid.). Brophy affirms that the last statement was true for Wilde could coin golden phrases in written and spoken words at will (Ibid.).

1.2 Aesthetic and Decadent Movements

The roots of the aesthetic movement was a German philosophy proposed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) "that a pure aesthetic experience resulted from disinterested contemplation of an object, without reference to reality or... object's ... morality" (Moss, 2001: 196). French intellectuals developed this and declared that works of art had no purpose beyond being beautiful, "art for art's sake". Another movement appeared, called the decadence, followed the artistic qualities of the late Roman Empire and Byzantine Greece. The style of writers of the decadent was highly artificial, seeking to shock, enthrall, or horrify the audience. The decadent movement revived and redefined the concept of the "dandy". This term was popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was applied to arrogant men of fashion who were concerned with fine clothes and polished manners (Ibid.).

Karl Beckson refers to the opinion of Charles Baudelaire, the French poet, essayist, and art critic, who mentioned that the Victorian dandyism shared many characteristics with the decadence like "worship of the town, and the artificial; grace, elegance, the art of pose; sophistication and the mask. The wit of epigram and paradox was called upon to confound the bourgeois" (Beckson, 1992:35). The characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* reflect Wilde's attitudes towards the aesthetic, decadent, and dandyism but in exaggerated form (Moss, 2001: 196). Jack Worthing shows the dandy's preference for London when he says:

Jack: When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. (I, 48, 46-47)*.

*Cithara or the kithara was an [ancient Greek musical instrument](#).

1.3 The Victorian Age and Victorians

The Victorian age was named after Queen Victoria (1819-1901) who ruled from 1837-1901. It witnessed an exciting period of prosperity in literary schools, artistic styles, social, political, and religious movements. Moreover, the social classes were newly reforming in England, especially the middle class and its power which increased with the expansion of industry and the explosion of population. Fiona Gregory mentions that the growth in the middle-classes meant that the values like respectability, earnestness, duty, and self-improvement became more prominent (Gregory, 2009: 7). Yet, the age suffered from poverty, injustice, and social standards among the working class. Thus, it was a complex and hard age to promote and invent its own values based on stability, progress, and social reform which showed respect and moral standards (Ilana Miller*, <http://www.victoriaspast.com/FrontPorch/victorianera.htm>).

Since 1837, when Victoria became queen, till her death in 1901, London had past six million citizens. Most of London's new people were middle-class; yet, for the first time in history the majority in a city were bourgeois (Roger Sale, 2003: 475-6). The dominant note of the Victorian literary work was its seriousness. They say that "the Victorians have been called "earnest" and "eminent" " (Inglis and Spear, 1958: 450-51). Yet, this does not mean that they do not know how to entertain themselves, it means that they appreciated life and tried to make it better. Moreover, this moral seriousness shows people's energy and motives to improve mankind and increase their knowledge (Ibid.).

* Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (I, 48, 46-47). Ed. W.S. Bunnell . London: The University of London Press LTD., 1958. All other quotations of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* are from this edition and henceforth are parenthetically cited within the text by act, page number, and line number.

* Ilana Miller was Adjunct Professor of History at Pepperdine University in Malibu.

As a matter of fact, this improvement is explained by the typical Victorian writers through their writings which, in the age of progress, increased the number of readers and as a result clarifying people's moral standards (Ibid. , 456).

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, adds that the Victorian age is characterized by being prudish, repressed, and old fashioned. Although this is, to some extent, true, those connotations do not indicate the nature of the whole age. The era was a period of technology, science, invention, industry, ideology, education, and art that saw great expansion of wealth, power, and culture (<http://www.victorianweb.org/vn/victor4.html>). It was the age of Darwin, Marx, and Freud in which they attempted to experience modern problems and modern solutions. The Victorians were innovative, to improve themselves and their environment. "In literature and other arts, the Victorians attempted to combine Romantic emphases upon self, emotion, and imagination with Neoclassical ones upon the public role of art and a corollary responsibility of the artist" (Ibid.). The Victorian writers tried to reflect the problems created by this progress in their writings. They were excellent in poetry, novel, and serious essays where the dominating force was towards a new and better world which was achieved through intelligence, co-operation, and a moral seriousness (Inglis and Spear, 1958: 460).

Near the end of the century, many people talked mockingly of Victorian compromise. People who lost their faith in human nature's goodness spoke of Victorian hypocrisy. A new generation of writers started little movements and magazines in London, influenced by foreign literature. A new spirit entered the Victorian era. "Oscar Wilde wrote crackling comedies and made unforgettable epigrams..." (Ibid. , 459). By the time of Oscar Wilde's appearance, English drama recovered itself to some degree. In his plays he

showed some strength and promise. "Wilde was a brilliant writer and literary thinker whose Maeterlinckian* idiom in farcical comedies had the power to keep the audience rooted to their seats. Startling paradoxes in a world without values create mirth that reminds of the restoration dramatists" (Rajimwale, 2009: 378).

What makes the Victorians Victorian more than anything else is their social sense of social responsibility (Landow, <http://www.victorianweb.org/vn/victor4.html>). By the end of the century, it was the liberal public school education what made someone a gentleman or a lady, no matter what her /his antecedents might be. It was really a complex age; yet, it has been called the second English renaissance. It opened the gate to the modern age (Miller, <http://www.victoriaspast.com/FrontPorch/victorianera.htm>).

Maeterlinckian Maurice Polydore Marie Bernard Maeterlinck (1862-1949) was a Belgian playwright, poet, and essayist who wrote in French (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Maeterlinck).

1.4 The Characteristics of Victorian Literature

The transformation from agricultural society into industrial meant progress for some people, but the majority of writers and thinkers believed that the inequality among the classes was a kind of disease that would spread widely, sooner or later. Thus, they saw it as their duty to speak loudly against the injustice of the new world. Thomas Carlyle essays attack the systematic abuse he saw around him. He believed that the industrial revolution was an engine of destruction for people's humanity. In her long poem "The Cry of the Children", Elizabeth Barrett-Browning shows how dangerous for children to work deep in the mines. Charles Dickens portrays the industrial revolution in his novels. They call attention to real-world problems that others might have swept under the rug; *Hard Times*

depicts the society's obsession with science and logic away from imagination. Women writers faced difficulties to gain recognition and acceptance; Mary Ann Evans worked under a fictitious male name to receive recognition. She published her first novels under the false name George Eliot (Josh Rahn, 2011: NP, In <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/victorian.php>).

The literature of the Victorian age explained the coalition of pure romance to gross realism. It witnessed two great poets, Tennyson and Browning. Also, this age produced excellent prose. Even science discoveries affected the literature of the age. If the Victorian age is divided into two equal periods, one would find that the first included all that was best of Lord Alfred Tennyson, Brownings, Dickens, the Brontës, George Eliot, Ruskin, and others. While the latter period gave the age Darwin, Spencer, G.H. Lewes, Matthew Arnold, Freeman, and others. "Poetry, romance, the critical, imaginative, and pictorial power dominate the former period: philosophy, science, politics, history are the real inspiration of the latter period" (Harrison, 2006: 10-11). They invented stories from their daily life and the earliest periods (Ibid. , 104).

Moreover, the literature portrays the daily life by reflecting its particular problems. It became an excellent means for human progress. The great advance in the material life dried up the sources of romance and this ruined poetry. The poet has his own ideal world that is isolated from others. On the other hand, prose novelists depict life as it is from intimate knowledge of real men and women (Ibid., 17). Harrison adds:

Literature is no longer "bookish" — but practical, social, propagandist. It is full of life — but it is a dispersive, analytic, erratic form of vitality.... It has no "standard", no "model", no

"best writer" — and yet it has a curious faculty of reviving every known form and imitating any style (2006: 12).

Literature of that period is strongly historical and afraid to colour it with imagination (Ibid.).

1.5 Victorian Man and Woman

The Victorian family was patriarchal, a social system in which the male, the father or the husband, represented the authority and responsibility figure to afford living. He was the one who took the important decisions. On the contrary, the place of the Victorian woman was her house, where she waited on for her suitable husband. Lynn Abrams, a senior lecturer in modern history who teaches social and women's history, mentions that the best career for woman in the Victorian era was marriage. This era is characterized as the domestic era. The age is epitomised by queen Victoria who represented the centre of the family by her motherhood and respectability. She became the pioneer for the middle-class femininity and domesticity (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml). In addition to that, she had to be able to sing, play an instrument, and speak French, Italian, or German. This is clear in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* when Cecily is taught German by Miss Prism.

Miss Prism: Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

Cecily:[Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

Miss Prism: Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday.

(II, 69, 4-11)*

Among the merits of being a Victorian lady were to be innocent, virtuous, dutiful, and ignorant of intellectual opinion. Victorian women, whether married or single, were dependent, that is to say, they were weak, fragile, and delicate as roses, and unable to take any decision except teaching their children moral values. Her devotion should be to her husband, as well as to her God. Thus, the house should be a comfortable place for the family (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/i_deals_womanhood_02.shtml).

Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself. (I, 60, 453-458).

Lady Bracknell's speech reflects the dependence of young girls on their families to decide their fate. A girl cannot choose her husband. The father or the mother only is the one who is able to give consent for the daughters' marriage.

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Women of different classes had different social obligations. A woman from the middle-class spent her time in reading, sewing, letter-writing, receiving guests, and going visiting, and raising up her children. A working-class woman had to work as a servant to gain her and the family's living. As property and money, children are also the property of the husband (David Taylor*, In <http://www.hastingspress.co.uk/history/19/taylor.htm>). A divorced woman has no right to see her children.

Men of middle-class and upper-class in the Victorian age may have secret relationships, since women of the same classes are supposed not to have sexual relationships before their marriage (<http://www.english.uwosh.edu/roth/VictorianEngland.htm>). Due to his social freedom, it was easy for man to pretend that he was someone else by having a dual personality. Algernon and Jack Worthing invented a friend for the former and a brother for the latter to satisfy their needs of living life to the full. Jack confesses that he has a dual life when Algernon confronts him after stealing his cigarette case.

Jack: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country. (I, 52, 166)

Algernon: I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. (I, 53, 223-5)

The Victorian age was a period of hypocritical and artificial relationships. Women were prevented from owning property until the end of 1887. Before that date, her property was inherited either by her family or her husband. Joyce Moss adds:

Men and women ... chose prospective partners with care. The man especially looked upon marriage as a career move since the woman's

property became his after the wedding, although the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870-1882, respectively, gave the wife some control over bequests on her own. After a man proposed and a woman accepted, he was expected to inform her parents of his intentions and acquaint them with his financial circumstances. Her parents, in turn, acquainted him with the amount of their daughter's fortune (2001: 195).

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack about his wealth, money, and parentage (Ibid.).

Lady Bracknell: What is your income?

Jac.: Between seven and eight thousand a year.

Lady Bracknell.: [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

Jack: In investments, chiefly.

Lady Bracknell.: That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

Jack: I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.

Lady Bracknell: A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

Jack: Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

....

Lady Bracknell: Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

Jack: 149.

Lady Bracknell: [Shaking her head.] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

Jack: Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

Lady Bracknell: [Sternly.] Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

Jack: Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.
(I, 61-62, 489-521)

When Algernon decides to marry Cecily, again, Lady Bracknell does not give her consent and before her leaving she asks Jack about Cecily's fortune.

Lady Bracknell: As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune? (III, 100, 156-58).

Jack: Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds.
(III, 100, 169).

Of course such huge amount of money changes Lady Bracknell's opinion towards Cecily. But when Jack refuses the engagement, Lady Bracknell objects.

Lady Bracknell: Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man.

He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?
(III, 102, 214-17).

Oscar Wilde criticized the practical and businesslike marriage and the stereotype ladies of the Victorian era who used to make a list of the suitable suitors for their daughters.

Lady Bracknell: I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men.
(I, 61-62, 468-469).

Wilde succeeded in depicting Lady Bracknell as a real Victorian woman. However, his intention was to mock her way of thinking and acting, because, at the end, Gwendolen and Cecily's achievements prove that they are better in their love, thinking, and action.

2.1 "The Importance of Being Earnest" and Its Genre

Oscar Wilde was a great master of words and phrases in his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The genre of this play is a mixture of satire, comedy of manners, social criticism, intellectual farce, and melodrama. As a satire, it uses comic techniques to ridicule a folly or a vice. Though the Victorian age is known as being one of high seriousness, its satirical writings show the hypocrisy and pomposity of the age. Wilde's play satirises different subjects as "the emphasis on appearance, Victorian attitudes to morality, the importance of 'name' and parentage, and British prejudice about other nations and their culture, in particular France and Germany" (Gregory, 2009: 11). Also, being a satire, it is associated with the life of city and presents the country life as uncorrupt (Morgan, 1987: 64). The difference between Shaw and Wilde is that Wilde does not direct his satire towards people but ideas. Thus, the audience will be amused

rather than shocked. Shaw uses theatre to reform the society, while Wilde mocks it only (Bunnell, 1958: 13).

Holman and Harmon define comedy of manners as a type of comedy which deals with "the manners and conventions of an artificial, highly sophisticated society" (1986: 100). Indeed this sounds so clear from the very beginning when Wilde describes the flat of Algernon with its luxurious and artificial furniture. He moves from the morning room to the music in the nearest room where Algernon has a piano to the afternoon tea-table. He concentrates on drawing the setting of the play to reflect the culture of that society.

Wilde once said, "The first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible" (quoted in Bunnell, 1958: 9). Bunnell affirms that, in writing his plays, Wilde constructs his plot out of implausible action, unbelievable characters, and fantastic events. "Wilde seems to have regarded drama purely and simply as the vehicle for clever and polished wit, liberally salted with paradox, repartee, and epigram" (1958: 9). He is unlike to-day's theatre where one expects some illusion of reality, and characters who think as men and women do (Ibid.).

J. L. Styan praises *The Importance of Being Earnest* as one of the best Victorian farces (1981: 38). Holman and Harmon state that farce is "a dramatic piece intended to excite laughter and depending less on plot and character than on exaggerated, improbable situations..." (1986: 199). Wilde uses confusion and misunderstanding to be the basis of his play's humour (Gregory, 2009: 12). Kerry Powell states that Wilde's play attacks the genre of farce as a whole, although sometimes it "sinks back into the orbit of tradition" (cited in Sammells, 2000: 112). Wilde uses some characteristics of farce against 'respectable' drama and its assertion "to psychological realism, seriousness of content and

representational authenticity. The staple of farce – disguise, mistaken identity, ... are transformed by Wilde into a dramatic exploration of ...social and sexual identity..."(Ibid. , 112-13).

The Importance of Being Earnest is also considered among the early Victorian melodrama. Although its subtitle is *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, it is not trivial, but rather a social commentary on some values and principles of the Victorian age. It has below the surface of the light comedy a serious implicit meaning of moralism and hypocrisy, the two important aspects of Victorian society. Wilde embodies society's rules and rituals artfully into Lady Bracknell. Fiona Gregory mentions that the most important feature of a melodrama is to be sentimental; for example, death, mother-and-child reunion, love, and the use of names to indicate the merits of characters (2009: 13). Wilde deals with most of those features in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack Worthing is lost when he is a baby and is reunited with his biological brother, his aunt, and governess at the end of the play. Moreover, Wilde plays with the name of Ernest and the concept of being earnest to fulfill his aim.

2.2 Style, Structure, and Language

The play looks artificial more than real, especially in its brilliant conversation. However, the setting is inspired by the high life of the Victorian age, as Wilde observed it. The dialogue shows pride, wit, and cleverness of wealthy classes. Wilde had the intention to reflect the true and accurate picture of the society (Bunnell, 1958: 10).

Peter Raby comments on Wilde's use of language saying that he achieved a unity and mastery in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that was unmatched in his other plays. There is an unevenness caused by the clash between what is 'serious' and what is 'trivial' in

the play (1988: 125). W. H. Auden indicated a special quality of the play by describing it as "the only pure verbal opera in English" (quoted in Raby, 1988: 123).

The play consists of three acts. The first act takes place in London. Most of the second and the third happen in Jack's country house. There is a mirroring which increases the artificiality of the play. Jack and Algernon, the two bachelors, are leading a double life; Gwendolen and Cecily, fall in love with the name 'Ernest'; Miss Prism and Dr. Chausble; Land and Merriman; only Lady Bracknell stands alone (Gregory, 2009: 14).

The use of paradox summarizes the plot, because Ernest is going to be earnest when he is not, as he will not be earnest only when he is. This paradoxical alteration gives the play the general meaning of Bunburyism (Fineman, 1980: 82). Although the name of Ernest inspires others to believe that a person with such a name is honest and trustful, the character of Jack is deceitful and dishonest. It is ironic to discover, at the end, that he is who he is pretending to be with Gwendolen all the time, and all his life he is telling the truth.

2.3 Double Lives

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* represents a mixture of the three levels of the society, i.e. the upper-class or the bourgeois, the middle-class, and the working class. As a clever critic, he concentrates on the life of the upper-class because it is seen as the class of elites.

The Importance of Being Earnest satirises "earnestness", a particular Victorian feature associated with sober behaviour and seriousness (Moss, 2001: 193). The conflict between earnestness and the clear appearance of frivolity is shown in more than one way: the pun in the title, the quarrel between serious Jack Worthing and

the lighthearted Algernon Moncrieff, the attractive name of "Ernest" for Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew (Ibid. , 194).

Gwendolen: ... my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is

something in that name that inspires absolute confidence.

(I, 58, 385-7)

Then she adds:

It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.

(I, 59, 404-5)

According to her, the man of the name Ernest can be trusted. Cecily Cardew, similarly, confesses to Algernon that her wish is to love someone whose name is Ernest.

Cecily: You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.

(II, 84, 509-13).

Algernon also shows his awareness of the Victorian people's passion for "earnestness" when Jack reveals his real name (Moss, 2001: 194).

Algernon: You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest.

(I, 51, 157-161).

The whole play is drawn around the double meaning of 'earnest' as an adjective and as a name, describing man's honesty and seriousness. Wilde's wit is manifested by the puns in *The*

Importance of Being Earnest which start with the title. It implies a connection between the concept of being earnest and the name of its hero Ernest, which makes it not only comic but also leads to paradox. Otto Reinert mentions that the action of the play is about the importance of being earnest. The play sheds light on the consequences of not being earnest, as Algernon calls it Bunburying. The meaning of Bunburying is to invent an imaginary character, who can serve as an excuse to escape a disappointing routine arranged by a repressive convention. Reinert adds, "Bunburying is simply the mechanism that sets in motion the preposterously elaborate plot of mistaken identities" (1956: 17). Duality gives the plot its moral sense. Algernon tells Jack that :

Algernon: Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature. (II, 93, 795-99)

For Algernon to be a Bunburyist is to live in a world free of the responsibilities and hypocritical conventions. The one who is serious about everything is not serious at all (Reinert, 1956: 17). Jack, on the other hand, creates Ernest to escape from the guardian's heavy duty (Jackson, 1980: xxxv). Joyce Moss explains how the two heroes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* elaborate double lives to avoid social norms and traditions. Algernon invents an imaginary friend whose name is Bunbury as an excuse to get rid of social obligations. While Jack's imaginary brother Ernest is a facet of himself that he wants to hide from Cecily, his young ward (2001: 198).

Jack: When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do

so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes.
(I, 53, 203-6)

The concept of double life was popular among Victorians. Actually, it showed that the Victorians inclined normally towards duality in both private and public life, separating their existence into halves. The Victorian man who leads double lives seems respectable in his house with the happy marriage, but he lives another life of promiscuity and depravity that his wife is completely unaware of (Moss, 2001: 198). The wives need their husbands to be earnest, true, and loyal. Algernon, for example, is not earnest. He has another life although he has no money, and he is irresponsible (Roger Sale, 2003: 476).

To be a respectable, successful, and well-known Victorian man, one should isolate himself from enjoying the pleasures of life and follows the restricting rules. By doing this, the man is prevented from showing his reality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde examines the importance of the double life as a matter of mocking the negative aspects in the Victorian society. He aims to illustrate how men are expected to behave duly make them create a fake identity to escape the norms and restrictions of their society. Such social regulations obliged people to be pretenders and lairs.

As far as duality is concerned, Wilde himself confessed that creating the mask of the dandy provided protection. B. H. Fussell refers to a letter written by Wilde in 1894. Wilde wrote:

To the world I seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely – it is not wise to show one's heart to the world – and as

seriousness of manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality and indifference and lack of care is the robe of the wise man. In so vulgar an age as this we all need masks (1972: 125).

For Wilde, art itself is a kind of disguise. Through art one can say whatever she/he wants to say without fear, as Shakespeare said in *Hamlet*, "By indirections find directions out" (II, i, 64).

Susan Van Kirk says that Jack's deceptive personality is a symbol of Wilde who deceived others for the sake of his pleasure in the homosexual community. Jack and Algernon live their lives through masks. Their dual identities resemble Wilde's who lived as a married man with a hidden homosexual life (2003: 20, 46).

Although homosexuality was illegal in the Victorian England, this is not the only reason that made people lead a double life. Many Victorian men supported the life of two households, one for the wife and the other for the mistress. Definitely, the reasons are the narrow view of the Victorian society towards what is morally acceptable. People who wanted to be respectable without following the hard rules, double life was the available solution.

2.4 The Bunburiest Characters

The two heros in this play share almost the same qualities though at the first glance they seem different.

2.4.1 Jack Worthing

Jack Worthing is found in a handbag in the clockroom of a railway station in London by Mr. Thomas Cardew. He becomes a responsible and respected man. After the death of Mr. Cardew, Jack becomes the guardian of Cecily, the granddaughter of Mr. Cardew. He pretends for years that he has a younger irresponsible brother, named Ernest. Ernest is the name of Jack goes by in London. His fictional brother is the excuse to escape his responsibilities and indulge in the sort of behaviour he pretends to disapprove of his brother. Jack Worthing, more than any other character in the play, represents the conventional Victorian values. He wants to show others that he has the notions of honour, duty, and respectability; however, he hypocritically flouts those notions. "What Wilde was actually satirizing through Jack was the general tolerance for hypocrisy in conventional Victorian morality. Jack uses his alter-ego Ernest to keep his honourable image intact" (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/characters.html>). Ernest helps Jack to escape his real identity and the boundaries of his real life as a guardian and the other responsibilities to act as he wish (Ibid.). The mask is a good excuse for Jack to tell lies to be able to misbehave. As the actions progress, Jack fights to be Ernest in name, if not in behaviour. Gwendolen, the girl that Jack wants to marry, insists on the name Ernest and this obliges him to ask Dr. Chasuble to christen him again.

Jack: ...I would like to be christened myself. (II, 77, 264).

But when Lady Bracknell sees Miss Prism, she recognizes her immediately. After questioning her about that baby that she took years ago, Miss Prism confesses that she left the poor baby in a handbag in clockroom in London station. Jack realizes that Lady Bracknell is his aunt and Algernon is his biological brother.

Jack: Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother!

After that Jack looks for his father's Christian name in the Army Lists. He becomes delighted when he discovers that the Christian name of his father was Ernest John. Lady Bracknell affirms that with annoyed accent for disliking the name.

I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

Lady Bracknell: Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest, I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

Gwendolen: Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

Jack: 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.
(III, 109, 466-475).

Finally, Jack is aware of the importance of being earnest.

Jack: I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.
(III, 110, 484-85).

2.4.2 Algernon Moncrieff

Algernon, the dandy figure in the play, is the secondary hero. "A charming, idle, decorative bachelor, Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral, and given to making delightful paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements that either make no sense at all or touch something profound" (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/characters.html>). He seems, at the first sight, the opposite of Jack, but actually they are the same. Algernon has invented a fictional friend, Bunbury, also to help him whenever he needs to

escape his real life. Like Jack, Bunbury provides Algernon an excellent way to avoid social obligations beside great seriousness and sense of duty.

Algernon: You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. (I, 53, 221-229).

If one compares Algernon with Jack, one finds that Jack does not admit to be a Bunburyist while Algernon acknowledges his wrong doing. Algernon has his own philosophy concerning life. He regards living life as a kind of art form (Ibid.).

Roger Sale mentions that Wilde depicted himself in Algernon's character being a dedicated Bunburyist (2003: 476). Fiona Gregory states, "With his charm, cleverness, and sense of style, Algernon is epitome (perfect example) of the dandy, as was Wilde himself" (2006: 34). She continues saying that Wilde shows desire as an important part of life in his play. "Algernon recognizes this, and celebrates his desires for trivial things without pretending to be serious about matters that are of less importance to him" (Ibid. , 65).

Cecily Cardew, in her speech with Algernon, mentions that if Algernon is not wicked, as Jack always says, then he is hypocrite.

Cecily: If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy. (II, 72-73, 123-26).

Algernon confesses in this way that he was "reckless" (II, 73, 128), and very bad.

3.1 Conclusion

The Importance of Being Ernest is a good motive to seek earnestness in oneself. In Oscar Wilde's play, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff live double lives. Jack assumes to have a spendthrift brother who lives in the city and whom he has to visit to set things right. Jack unintentionally uses the name Ernest for his imaginary brother. As a matter of fact, the whole play is built upon the meaning of being earnest. For Jack, he pretends all the time to be not what he is and at the end he discovers that he is what he is not. Algernon, on the other hand, invents an imaginary friend to visit the country whenever he wishes and to escape social obligations. Of course the purpose behind writing *The Importance of Being Ernest* is to criticize the strict rules and the over-seriousness in the Victorian age which have led to manipulate the way of living.

Wilde attacks the Victorian morality and refuses to take life as seriously as the Victorian sense of power. Jack and Algernon deceive others to shirk their responsibilities and behave freely. At the end, everything ends well.

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