

**The Essentials of deceit: Postmodern reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest*
by Oscar Wilde**

Baskota Dhananjaya
Department of English
Damak Multiple Campus
E-mail : baskotadh@gmail.com

Abstract

The society and its dimensions change; however, some basic natures never change. Deceit has pervaded every society over the ages; and no sarcastically we claim, it has become essential. This paper explores Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) through a novelty approach of reading the text, i.e. postmodernist lens, focusing on the concepts of fraud and cheating, rather than displaying just absolute deception as a moral degradation. Wilde, through this play, satirizes Victorian norms and values, and illustrates the fluidity of truth and essential identity which prevails in the human mind. Employing theoretical frameworks from Lyotard (1979) and Baudrillard (1981), this study finds out that duplicity operates not only as comic consolation but also as a critique of essentialist values in this play. Using qualitative textual analysis, this article tries to explore how postmodern thought such as simulation, irony, uncertainty of truth, unstable meaning and performativity are assimilated in Wilde's work in different dimensions.

Keywords: Cheating, deceit, disguise, identity, postmodernism, simulation, Victorian society

Introduction

Background of the study

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), born in Dublin, Ireland where he realised moral decay in the name of nationalism. This insight inspired him to art controversy. His major works generally advance mockery and deceit. His *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), his only novel, keeps exploring hedonism, aestheticism, and moral corruption. His play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is a witty and satirical play, regarded as his

masterpiece on disguising and Fraud, which are the essentials to survive in the society. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) is a four-act play that critiques Victorian society, especially its hypocrisy, moral rigidity, and treatment of women. The plot centers around Lady Windermere, who suspects her husband is having an affair with the mysterious Mrs. Erlynne, unaware that Mrs. Erlynne is actually her long-lost mother. So, forgiveness, secrecy, and reputation are woven into sharp wit and ironic dialogue. *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) is a play where Wilde criticizes gender and double standards on how society punishes women harshly for sexual indiscretions while excusing men. There is hypocrisy of the upper class and embodies moral strength and challenges the idea that women should be ashamed of their past. Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), a four-act play, presents public vs. private morality with the gap between one's reputation and personal actions. There are fuming flaws that 'no one is truly ideal'. And it challenges Victorian ideals of a 'perfect wife' or 'ideal husband.' This play displays power and corruption in which the political sphere is shown as susceptible to moral compromise. *De Profundis* (1897) is a long, reflective letter written in prison expressing love, betrayal, suffering and redemption, pain of betrayal and imprisonment, and the spiritual growth he gained through suffering. Similarly, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) is a poem about prison life and injustice, suffering and sympathy, death and mortality, redemption and spiritual reflection.

Richard Ellmann (1987) states 'Wilde saw Victorian morality as a performance and used his plays to reveal its hollowness through theatrical irony.' This can be seen in *An Ideal Husband*, in which Sir Robert Chiltern's political career rests on a secret dishonesty, mocking the 'ideal' of public virtue (p.350). There are many critics who have assessed Wilde as not only a satirist but also a pounce on the social hypocrisy, deceit and hollowness. He has made satire of gender roles and the *Angel in the House*, which challenges the submissive domestic ideal of women, often presenting female characters as witty, self-aware, and resistant to Victorian norms.

Sos Eltis in *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (2002) writes:

Wilde's plays destabilize the rigid gender binaries of his time by portraying women who wield verbal and moral power. Wilde makes satire of class and social pretension and mocks the class system's obsession with lineage, wealth, and marriage (p.70).

Wilde's comedy is the attack to the aristocratic society of Victorian era.

Wilde's comedy uses the aristocracy's own language to undermine their pretensions (Powell, 2004, p. 129).

Wilde's use of epigram and paradox really fascinates to the absurdity of Victorian conventions. Wilde's paradoxes expose the instability of social truths by turning accepted wisdom into linguistic play.

Wilde makes satire of the aesthetic and dandy persona and satirizes the aesthetic movement and the image of the 'dandy', often through self-parody.

Wilde's dandy is a subversive figure, mocking the economic and moral seriousness of the age (Gagnier, 1986, p. 26).

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) generally makes pageant for its wit and social satire. However, its deeper philosophical implications regarding truth, morality, and identity reverberate with postmodernist principles. The constructed identities of Ernest and Bunbury reflect what Baudrillard (1981) calls 'simulacra'—copies without originals; and it is a type of disguise (p.101). By elevating deception to an art form, Wilde confronts with the Victorian ideals of authenticity and underscores the socially formulated nature of morality and identity (Hutcheon, 1989).

In the same way, (Greenblatt, 2006) examined that Wilde, earlier, in an interview, had described his overall aim in writing it: "It has as its philosophy . . . that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." Just before his death, he remarked that although he was pleased with the 'bright and happy' tone and temper of his play, he wished it had a 'higher seriousness of intent.' Later critics have found this seriousness of intent in the play's deconstruction of Victorian moral and social values (p. 1891).

The Importance of Being Earnest is carrying the norms and values of postmodern thought. Postmodernism is a complex and multifaceted intellectual movement that emerged in the mid-to-late 20th century as a reaction against the principles and ideals of modernism. It spans across philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and culture, characterized by skepticism toward grand narratives, objective truth, and universal meaning.

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid-20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. It is generally characterized by skepticism, irony, or rejection of the grand narratives and ideologies of modernism as well as opposition to epistemic certainty and the stability of meaning (Blackburn, 2008, p. 415).

There are innumerable thinkers defining postmodernism focusing on the uncertainty of truth and knowledge. Postmodernism... questions the assumptions of enlightenment rationality, science, and the possibility of objective knowledge. It emphasizes relativity, fragmentation, and the social construction of reality (Lyotard, 1979, p.80).

Baudrillard (1981) summarizes about postmodernism that it is skepticism toward metanarratives, which rejects universal explanations and promotes fragmentation to emphasize disunity and multiplicity in meaning, irony and pastiche. It carries on ironic imitation and collage of styles, genres intertextuality, texts reference or incorporate other texts, hyperreality blurring of reality and simulation to prove that every concept is seen in the part and claim to be whole.

Moreover, the Victorian Age (1836-1900) is roaming and pervading in this play. The age was governed by the focus on the individual, social criticism, pessimism and skepticism, idealized women and patriarchy, strict social hierarchies, tension between faith and reason and confusion (Mitchell, 1996, p. 29). Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* pivots over these social realities being a critic. Wilde's trend in writing, particularly as seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, consistently revolves around themes of fraud, deception, and the performance of identity, which aligns deeply postmodernist tools of seeing the existence.

Research questions

1. How does this play use deceit and dual identities as tools to deconstruct Victorian social norms and moral rigidity?
2. What are postmodernist themes which reject the absolute truths?

Research objectives

1. To analyze the theme of deceit and dual identities in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and how they function within the framework of postmodernist theory.
2. To explore the ways in which Oscar Wilde critiques Victorian norms and values such as irony, parody, fragmentation, simulation, absurdity, morality, marriage, class, performativity and subversive behavior.

Literature Review

The Importance of Being Earnest is the masterpiece of Victorian British society which tries to survive in deceit and uncertainty. Different critics have presented their views as per cultural identity of the British society. But the British society, in fact, was struggling

with the trauma of changes. The struggle in gender equality and social hypocrisy is major issue in creative art. This has created trauma in common living. This trauma is reflected in this play. Critics such as Raby (1988) have emphasized Wilde's role in critiquing rigid Victorian morality through satire. Dellamora (1990) further contextualizes Wilde within the aesthetic movement, noting his resistance to bourgeois values (p.205). Wilde's paradoxical wit—where truth is delivered through lies—has long puzzled scholars (Beckson, 2009). Aestheticism is in fraud, hypocrisy and lies, too.

Postmodern theorists have also framed such subversion as integral to the postmodern condition. Lyotard (1979) argues that grand narratives of truth and virtue collapse under the weight of pluralism and irony (p. 34-37), while Baudrillard (1981) introduces the idea that simulacra dominate social interactions (p. 6). Hutcheon (1989) expands this by asserting that postmodern texts are 'self-aware' and reject singular interpretations (p.12). Postmodernism problematizes the very possibility of meaning and signals its own provisionally and self-awareness in the text breaking the 'Eurocentric knowledge', particularly in literature and art. Postmodern reading sees texts as self-reflexive or self-aware and rejects unified or singular interpretation and 'absolutisms'. In postmodernism, truth is like touching an elephant by six blind people in different parts of its body and acknowledging six different meaning of the same elephant!

Wilde's play fits this frame, as it constantly blurs the line between real and performative selves. As Cohen (2010) points out, Wilde 'dissolves the binary between truth and performance, replacing it with theatricality as lived experience (p.468).'

Despite such insights, existing scholarship lacks focused analysis of fraud and cheating as thematic lenses. This paper addresses that gap.

Methodology

This study applies qualitative textual analysis informed by postmodern literary theory.

Key steps include:

- Close reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to identify expressions of fraud, identity manipulation, and irony
- Thematic coding using concepts such as simulation (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6), performativity (Butler, 1990, p.25), and post-ironic distance (Hutcheon, 1989, p.13) as the tools of postmodernism.

Baudrillard's concept of *simulation* challenges the distinction between reality and representation. He argues that in postmodern culture, signs no longer refer to an original reality; instead, they circulate independently, creating what he terms *hyperreality*.

Baudrillard explains that simulation is not merely imitation but a condition in which “*the real is no longer what it used to be*”(p.6), as signs precede and determine reality rather than reflect it. When used in thematic coding, *simulation* helps identify fake identities presented as authentic, political or social roles performed according to media images rather than lived truth narratives where truth is endlessly deferred. Such themes are coded under *simulation*, highlighting how meaning is produced through artificial signs rather than empirical reality.

Judith Butler’s Theory of *Performativity* (1990) argues that identity—especially gender—is not an innate or stable essence but is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and discourses. Butler asserts that ‘identity is an effect of performance rather than its cause’(p.25). Performativity allows to code themes related to identity as constructed rather than natural, repetition of norms (gendered, social, cultural), moments where performances fail, subvert, or parody dominant identities.

Linda Hutcheon conceptualizes postmodernism as marked by irony with critical distance—what she terms *post-ironic distance* (1989). She explains that ‘postmodern texts simultaneously use and question the very conventions they appear to endorse’ (p.13). This irony is not cynical detachment but a self-reflexive strategy that exposes ideological assumptions while still operating within them. Through this lens, thematic coding captures how texts resist singular interpretations and invite readers into a space of ambiguity and critical awareness.

Contextual linkage to Victorian societal norms and theoretical critique states:

The analysis centers on Wilde’s text, supported by relevant secondary literature, emphasizing interpretive insight over empirical generalization (Ryan, 2015, p. 3).

Results and Discussion

Victorian reflections

Cheating and frauding starts from the beginning of the play *The Importance of Being Ernest* when Jack visits his friend Algernon. This continues, Algernon, too, starts frauding living under the alias Ernest. This attracts the readers that such deception was necessary in the Victorian society. There were different opinions and practices about life, love, marriage, society, individuals and satirizing the mockable reflections in the society. There was Satire of Marriage and Social Expectations in Victorian England, marriage was seen as a social contract rather than a romantic union. Wilde mocks love making it secondary to wealth and lineage through Algernon’s and Lady Bracknell’s attitudes:

Algernon: Divorces are made in Heaven (Wilde, 2011, p.576).

Lady Bracknell : An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant.(p.584).

Wilde is the critique of class and identity of Victorian society, which was rigidly class based. Wilde challenges this by having Jack and Algernon live double lives, and Jack's uncertain origins (a baby found in a handbag) highlight the absurdity of aristocratic obsession with lineage where Wilde questions the validity of class superiority when it rests on arbitrary social codes.

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent...may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness (p.613).

Wilde portrays Victorian morality and hypocrisy in this play. The play's title mocks the Victorian value of 'earnestness' – implying sincerity and duty. Wilde ironically presents characters who pretend to be 'earnest' but lead deceptive lives. The characters' duplicity contrasts with Victorian ideals of honesty, revealing societal hypocrisy.

Algernon: The truth is rarely pure and never simple (p. 579).

Wilde's play holds a mirror to late Victorian society, exposing its contradictions through irony, paradox, and comic absurdity. The enduring success of *The Importance of Being Earnest* lies in its clever dismantling of the era's most sacred institutions: class, marriage, and moral virtue.

Postmodernism reflections

Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is keenly viewed with lens of postmodernism. Wilde argues, anticipates postmodernism—not as a time but as an aesthetic stance that Earnest embodies this avant-garde timelessness. Pluralism, double identities, paradoxes, and deconstructs the Victorian moral boundary. He is the critic of these barriers through binaries. It underscores irony, playfulness, black humor, metafiction, and pastiche which are all central to Earnest mirroring postmodern hyperreality and simulation. Hutcheon (1989) enumerates about the play that postmodernism dismantles the notion of a singular, coherent identity, a theme Wilde explores through the double lives of Jack and Algernon.

Wilde's play operates less as a medium of truth and more as a playful game, where meaning is deferred endlessly, a hallmark of postmodern skepticism. He uses duplicity not to critique of society but to expose its absurdity. Fraud is not condemned but instrumental, a notion that fits postmodern readings where ethics are not binary. Deconstruction assumes to find binary opposition for meaning:

Deconstruction reveals the hidden work of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world, we must first understand deconstruction's view of language because, according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them (Tyson, 2006, p-249).

Wilde as a precursor to postmodernism due to his use of paradox, contradiction, and rejection of moral absolutes; all of which are evident in the way characters use deceit to shape reality. The absurd plots and witty dialogues in his play represent a kind of pastiche, characteristic of the postmodern mixing of genres and tones.

Wilde delights in artifice and lies not as moral failings but as aesthetic tools. He views truth as 'a matter of style,' not fact; which aligns with postmodernist distrust of absolute truths. Wilde declares irony and paradox with the epigrams in this way:

Algernon: The truth is rarely pure and never simple (Wilde, 2011, p. 579).

Wilde reflects self-reflexivity / metafiction in which the protagonists try to blur identity creating own artifice. His self-referential humor and the play's metafictional elements, such as characters being aware of the absurdity of social conventions, align with postmodern narrative strategies. Similarly, there is deconstructions of identities; Jack and Algernon's dual life deconstruct Victorian moral authority. The characters present themselves as hypocritical people. Being the follower of 'Art for Art Sake Aesthetic Movement', Wilde collapses metanarratives and going beyond expectation.

Culture and education

Oscar Wilde deconstructs and mocks the Victorian culture and education in *The Importance of Being Ernest*:

Lane: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

Algernon: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that (Wilde, 2011, p. 575).

Customs and rules are made to simplify and order life, but Wilde mocks them that punctuality is just a hypocrisy. People are fond of using them to prove superiority in the society.

Algernon (*stiffly*): I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday (p. 575).

Education seems to be fun, and Wilde tries to question the established view of life, gender stereotypes and changes.

Gwendolen: Outside the family circle, Papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly, once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties, he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive. Cecily, Mama, whose views on education are remarkably strict as brought me up to be extremely shortsighted; it is part of her system, so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses? (p. 602).

Frauding/ lying

Victorian society often expected to have ordered, moral and true life. But Wilde frequently ridiculed them in *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Comedy as Subversion
Wilde often employs wit and comedy to undermine authority and so-called rules.

Algernon (*stiffly*): I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

Jack (*pulling off his gloves*): When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring (Wilde, 2011, p.576).

The climax of lying is in the Jack's announcement of the death of his brother 'Ernest', in which Cecily has believed all the way till that date, and she was in love with him. This announcement shocked Cecily a lot.

Jack: Who?

Cecily: Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

Jack: What nonsense! I haven't got a brother (Wilde, 2011, p. 596).

The lying starts to unfold, and Jack denounced to be 'Ernest' then. Lying cannot be carried on so far. Performance theory is coming into disillusion.

Jack: Merriman, order the dog cart at once. Mr. Ernest has been suddenly called back to town.

Merriman: Yes, sir. (*Goes back into the house.*)

Algernon: What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town at all (Wilde, 2011, p. 598).

When both Cecily and Gwendolen are deceived by the same name 'Ernest' by two boys disguising with nickname, their name had never existed there. Now the simulation and performance is coming to end for the reflection of reality.

Jack (*standing rather proudly*): I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years.

Cecily (*to Gwendolen*): A gross deception has been practiced on both of us. (p. 606).

Instead of condemning deception, he makes it delightful, even the title is a pun — 'earnestness' (sincerity) is ironically linked to not being earnest at all. Aestheticism and the lie are made as art; Wilde's aesthetic philosophy values beauty and imagination over truth and morality. This play's ideals are to examine how truth is performed rather than possessed.

Love, relationships and marriage

Victorian society believed in pure and true love relations, cultural and disciplined married life, tension between faith and practice.

Wilde, in this play, advocates that such social hierarchies are not real. He destabilizes institutions like marriage and deconstructs these ideals in this way:

Algernon: I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal.Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

Jack: I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

Algernon: Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject (Wilde, 2011, p. 576).

Marriage age is also romanticized in this play, and married males are made a lot of fun. Mocking the males is not just entertainment for women, but social and cultural reality.

Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack (*after some hesitation*): I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it (p. 584).

Wilde hints to adapt later marriage, which is against Victorian ideals. He speaks through his characters in this way:

Chasuble: But is a man not equally attractive when married?

Miss Prism: No married man is ever attractive except to his wife (Wilde, 2011, p.594).

Orderly marriage is made a fun, and 'multi affairs' is entertained though it was against established norms of the society.

Algernon: But why on earth did you break it off ? What had I done ? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly, when the weather was so charming.

Cecily: It would hardly have been a serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out (p. 601).

Morality, truthfulness and untruthfulness are unmeasurable traits, they are necessary in the society. But untruthfulness becomes truthfulness here breaking the binary opposition. Age Fraud is natural for the girls! Wealth, social position, and fashionable life is more important than love.

Lady Bracknell: You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating — (In a meditative manner.) Eighteen but admitting to twenty at evening parties. Well, it will not be very long before you are of age and free from the restraints of tutelage. So, I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance (p. 614).

Wilde deconstructs these ideals and he further justifies his ideals in this way:

Lady Bracknell: That does not seem to me to be a grave objection. Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years. I see no reason why our dear Cecily should not be even still more attractive at the age you mention than she is at present. There will be a large accumulation of property (p. 613- 14).

Value of name

The contemporary British society focused on the value of name and individual identity. Wilde ridicules the people who run after the name, and nothing is as important as name. This makes to love 'Ernest' whose existence is no longer there. No man is in this name whom two women are in love. Finding character as per name is impossible search for truth! But it happens in the play. We can assume the value of name that overcomes the complexity of time. To run after the name was idiot tradition of Victorian society. The following extractions prove it:

Gwendolen: Yes, I am quite aware of the fact. And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you (Wilde, 2011, p.582).

Cecily: You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. (*Algernon rises, Cecily also.*) There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest (p. 601).

Jack: On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the

vital Importance of Being Earnest (p.619).

The punning conclusion mocks sincerity by rewarding deceit; a deeply ironic closure that exemplifies postmodern playfulness. Gwendolen's superficial fixation on the name rather than the person critiques the arbitrariness of identity, fitting with postmodern ideas about signs and signifiers which is Saussurian linguistics and Derrida's deconstruction.

Victorian Ideals / hypocrisy

Oscar Wilde (2011) makes fun of the ideals of the contemporary British society.

He deconstructs the concept of relations and reconstructs unexpected ideology about relations.

Algernon: My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die (Wilde, 2011, p.587).

Gwendolen: Personally, I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

Cecily: Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax? (p. 605)

Wilde applies the philosophy 'German Skepticism' which is a tradition of philosophical doubt and critical inquiry that developed within German philosophy, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. It is not a single doctrine, but rather a general approach or attitude emphasizing the limits of knowledge, doubt about metaphysical claims, and

critical examination of reason itself. This philosophy is a tool for postmodern discourse limiting the knowledge and perception.

Gwendolen: I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German skepticism. (*Moving to Cecily.*) Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it (p. 610).

Wilde's play critiques the artificiality of Victorian social norms, displaying how deceit is not a deviation but a necessity in maintaining one's social standing.

Fashion

Wilde presents unpredictable fashion about eating habit, that generally builds fashion, to deconstruct established norms of eating. People try to reflect their social status through their eating culture.

Cecily (*sweetly*): Sugar?

Gwendolen (*superciliously*): No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable anymore. (*Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs, and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.*)

Cecily (*severely*): Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen (*in a bored manner*): Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays (Wilde, 2011, p. 605).

Wilde attacks on the concept 'overdressed are overeducated', and it is funning the Victorian culture. The overdressed people would be educated; but in fact it was just hollowness.

Algernon: Yes, if you are not too long. I never saw anybody take so long to dress and with such little result.

Jack: Well, at any rate, that is better than being always overdressed as you are.

Algernon: If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely overeducated.

Jack: Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd.....(p. 598).

Wilde creates a society in the play which mainly lives 'in an age of surfaces'. This surface life is against Victorian concept; but the life would be basically surface !

Lady Bracknell (sitting down again): A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day

have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. (To Cecily.)....(p. 612).

Gender

Gender stereotypes carried on in the Victorian society has been dismantled in this play. Such change is confronting the established norms about gender, the gender biasness. This is longing for gender equality.

Gwendolen: How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

Jack: We are! (*Clasps hands with Algernon.*)

Cecily: They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely Nothing (Wilde, 2011, p. 610).

Wilde reflects the dominance of patriarchy in the contemporary society which is mocked vividly. That is the reason for demanding separate law for men and women. Gender discrimination prevails in this play.

Miss Prism (*recoiling in indignant astonishment*): Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

Jack: Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. (p. 417)

The repression of women in the society is exposed in the confrontation for the freedom of women. Woman 'can' live even by lying her age! The dialogue by Lady Bracknell proves it in this way:

Lady Bracknell (to Cecily): Come here, sweet child. (*Cecily goes*) How old are you, dear?

Cecily: Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

Lady Bracknell: You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age (p.614).

Confession

After mocking the established norms and values of the society, Wilde appears to go to confession. People must accept the truth, though they may go very far away. Confession, forgiveness and reunion are the fundamental elements of comedy. This play

declares that despite the weaknesses, human being must forgive and must confess. Binary opposition helps to explore meaning and the conflict resolves:

Jack (*slowly and hesitatingly*): Gwendolen — Cecily — it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth..... I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.

Cecily (*surprised*): No brother at all?

Jack (*cheerily*): None (Wilde, 2011, p. 607)

Jack's birth was in mystery till the last moment of the play. But there no option, so the birth and growth of the child is unfolded. The binary opposition of truth and false goes forward till this point.

Miss Prism (*still more indignant*): Mr. Worthing, there is some error. (*Pointing to Lady Bracknell.*) There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

Jack (after a pause): Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

Lady Bracknell: I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother (p. 618)

Finding the truth is the aim of life and work. As Jack Lacan says, we have always trauma of the real /truth.

Lacan's notion of the Real is a very difficult concept that he had trouble explaining. One way to think of the Real is as that which is beyond all our meaning-making systems, that which lies outside the world created by the ideologies which the society uses to explain existence (Tyson, 2006, p.32).

The truth is behind the curtain. It is like peeling the onion for kernel, but no kernel. Yet we are satisfied with what the truth we have invented! Finding and saying the truth is very painful or trauma.

Algernon: The truth is rarely pure and never simple (Wilde, 2011, p.576)

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. Can you forgive me (p. 619)?

Oscar Wilde (2011) playfully explores deception through characters like Jack and Algernon, whose false identities are accepted without punishment. This shows how truth and sincerity are treated as flexible concepts—especially with the name 'Ernest'

becoming a joke about seriousness. Wilde suggests that pretending can be more meaningful than being 'real,' and even the ending mocks traditional moral closure. His ideas reflect postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Butler, and Foucault, who argue that identity, truth, and morality are not fixed but performed, simulated, or shaped by subtle social forces. Wilde's comedy both mocks and uses these ideas, showing that cheating can be a path to freedom.

Conclusion

A postmodern literary reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* suggests that acts of deception and performative identity are not merely transgressive behaviors but intentional modes of degrading dominant social narratives. Wilde's use of irony, parody, and aesthetic play destabilizes conventional notions of truth and authenticity, aligning with postmodern critiques of essentialist identity. The characters' manipulation of language and roles foregrounds the constructed and performative nature of the self, prefiguring key poststructuralist insights into subjectivity and representation. In this sense, Wilde's work anticipates postmodern concerns with simulation, intertextuality, and the fragmentation of meaning, positioning the play as an early literary interrogation of grand narratives and moral absolutism (Lyotard, 1979). Ultimately, *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not simply entertain through farce; it subtly critiques the epistemological foundations of Victorian society. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to expose how social identities are scripted, rehearsed, and negotiated—making Wilde's satire remarkably prescient in the context of contemporary literary and cultural theory.

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