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## An Age of Surfaces: *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Anita Ahmadi**

Ph.D Research Scholar  
Department Of English  
Warangal506009  
Telangana

### Abstract

The nineteenth century was a time of stereotyped social codes governing various aspects of life including sex and morality. Despite this restrictive environment a great revolutionary phenomenon swept through the English society. That phenomenon is signified by Oscar Wilde, novelist, poet, playwright, aesthete, unrepentant homosexual, and enigma. Wilde's theatrical debut and success came with his plays *Lady Windermere's Fan* and his 1893 comedy *A Woman of No Importance* brought him immense success as a playwright and earned him handsome and regular income. In 1895 his next play *An Ideal Husband* was stage at the Haymarket Theatre and his last important play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was produced by the St. James's Theatre. These last two plays are his best in when were tremendous theatrical successes. They were not only popular with the audiences but they were also critical hits. Around this time his homosexual relationship with the young man Lord Alfred Douglas led to a trial and imprisonment for two years in Reading gaol.. Wilde's comedies are often described as comedies of manners, are actually dark comedies that sought to criticise the unfriendly social norms and moral codes of the Victorian Era. These norms and codes were highly detrimental to the interests of the vulnerable sections of society, especially women. These plays also held up to ridicule the hypocrisy, corruption and unjust practices of the time.

**Keywords: dark comedy, Victorian society, puritanical, decadence, aestheticism, moral codes.**

Oscar Wilde wrote his plays against the backdrop of the Victorian English society. It therefore helps to discuss the salient aspects of the Victorian society. Victorian England is known for many paradoxes -- glaring contrasts between the rich and the poor, insistence on morality on the one hand and the practice of cynicism on the other, blooming creativity pitted against blatant constriction, imperial grandeur since Britain was then ruling almost one fifth of the total surface of the earth and domestic squalor since the majority of people did not have decent means of livelihood, and finally collectivity dictated by tradition opposed to the rapidly developing individualism. The class system denied the talented members of the lower classes access to social and economic advancement. The upper classes alone had the privilege of working in the government, the armed forces, and the church, while trade was monopolized by the rising middle class. The lower classes were obliged to work hard in the factories and farms and make do with

very low wages. It often resulted in friction between the classes bordering on social strife although it never erupted in a revolution the way it did in France. The injustice of the English society encouraged novelists such as Oscar Wilde to describe in moving terms the many hardships suffered by the common people and the many failures and follies of English life.

Oscar Wilde's great plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, incorporates some classical features of dark comedy not only in social terms but also in terms of episodes and situations. First produced at the St. James's in February 1895, it is focused on the lives of four young people -- Algernon Moncrieff (Algy for short), Jack Worthing, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. Forced by circumstances and obliged by the custom of projecting a respectable public facade Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing maintain double identities -- while Algernon claims to have a non-existent sick friend in the country, whom he calls Bunbury, and goes 'visiting' him for several days on the end whenever he wishes to find relief from the obligations of city life, Jack Worthing for his part claims to have a worthless and wicked younger brother, called Ernest, living in the city of London and goes 'visiting' him quite often and for several days at a time whenever he is tired of playing the responsible guardian to his ward Cecily. In town, he assumes the name of Ernest perhaps to further obscure his identity and professes love for Algernon's first cousin Gwendolen. Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing are friends and at the opening of the play Jack is at Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street, London, and the purpose of his visit is to propose to Gwendolen who is due to arrive there soon with her mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell. His proposal of marriage is eagerly accepted by Gwendolen primarily because his name is Ernest as she adores that name, but is rejected by her mother because of his uncertain lineage. It so happens that Jack is a foundling -- discovered in a hand-bag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station by the kindly Mr Thomas Cardew, who adopted him and eventually made him guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Lady Bracknell dismisses Jack with these words.

Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion - has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now - but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society. (Wilde, *Earnest* 28)

The disappointed Jack returns home, and now that he has no further need for a putative younger brother called Ernest, he decides to 'kill' him. Accordingly, as soon as he is back at his Manor House at Woolton he proclaims to Cecily, her governess Miss Prism and the village priest Rev. Canon Chasuble that his brother has died of severe chill in Paris. He also expresses his willingness to be christened Ernest in the hope of winning Gwendolen's hand at some future date.

In the meantime, Algernon who has been fascinated by Jack's description of his ward Cecily and developed fondness for her, comes to the country estate ahead of Jack himself and claims to be his younger brother Ernest. Now Cecily too has very clear ideas about names. She has always wanted to marry someone named Ernest.

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.... There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. (Wilde, *Earnest* 62)

From Jack's description of his brother Ernest *in absentia* she has already fallen in love with him and now that he has materialized right in front of her she is more than willing to accept his proposal of marriage.

Gwendolen too comes there in pursuit of her sweetheart Ernest-Jack and the two ladies discover soon enough that neither of the two young men is actually named Ernest. They feel cheated but are willing to accept their explanation for assuming false names and forgive them.

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. [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.

CECILY. I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity. (Wilde, *Earnest* 83)

However, there are some loose ends to be fixed before things can go any further. The arrival of Lady Bracknell in hot pursuit of her daughter resolves these issues. Her enquiries reveal that Jack is in fact the son of her sister Mrs Moncrieff, and therefore the elder brother of Algernon. When he was a baby Miss Prism, who was in charge of him then, happened to place him in a hand-bag and deposit it in the cloak-room at Victoria Station keeping instead the manuscript of her three-volume novel in the baby's perambulator. It is also soon established that Jack was in fact named Ernest after his father General Ernest John. Everybody is thus happy with everybody else in the end. Lady Bracknell also gives her consent to Algernon's marriage with Cecily in view of her considerable wealth.

It is amazing that the English society received the play so well in spite of its implied criticism of many of its dearly held practices and beliefs. Indeed the play satirizes the Victorian double standards, double identities and its obsession with style rather than substance. It is an eloquent commentary on how the Victorians projected themselves as being earnest but actually lived in a make believe world of false prestige, false images and false relationships. Thus, although, on the surface the play has all the trappings of a hilarious comedy, beneath the surface it is biting critical of the Victorian English society. It is also a most fulsome dark comedy complete with assumed names, double life, lost and found children, love *in absentia* and instantaneous love. These elements of the generic dark comedy supplement and sharpen the social criticism that has been deftly worked into the play.

In spite of some spectacular achievements in a variety of fields the Victorian Era demonstrated an unhealthy affinity with tradition, social ritualization and its own brand of decency of decorum all of which contributed to the breeding of a sterile morality. The attitudes of the age discouraged independent thinking, curbed creativity and encouraged conformity to the established standards. These standards themselves were derived from Queen Victoria, the 'Widow of Windsor,' whose position on many issues was ambiguous. For example, she was opposed to adult franchise for

women but advocated education for them. Being a female monarch she symbolized political possibilities for women but her being a submissive wife encouraged women to follow suit, rather than question male domination. William M. Kuhn points this out in his essay, "The Monarchy and the House of Lords: The 'Dignified' Parts of the Constitution."

The fact that there was a woman on the throne had both positive and negative consequences for Victorian women. It opened up possibilities for them in going against the orthodoxy that women had no political abilities; but it also reinforced prevailing gender stereotypes, as when, for example, Victoria had herself represented in portraiture as submissive and deferential to her husband. (Kuhn 102)

Not surprisingly, women's status did not improve much all through the Victorian Era in spite of the emergence of the New Woman who pleaded for rights and privileges for women. Essentially women remained dependent on men for their sustenance and social security. Marriage was, as it had always been, the chief preoccupation of young women and so husband-hunting was a full time activity since around the age of seventeen till they were comfortably married. Women, unlike men, married rather early not only because life span was short at that time and they were required to bring about the next generation as early as possible, but also because of the severe competition for the most eligible bachelors. Given this situation young women preoccupied themselves with thoughts of marriage and constantly dreamed about the future husbands, and often even had specific ideas about what kind of men they should be. These eligible bachelors invariably hailed from the same social class and had stable sources of income. Although marriages for love were not unheard of the norm was arranged marriages. Parents played an important role in the negotiations and in the final analysis marriages tended to become mercenary affairs between families rather than alliances between young men and women based on love.

Appearances and outward decency were sought to be maintained at the cost of honesty and genuine aspirations. People were encouraged to swim on the surface of life so that what lurked underneath it, which in most case quite ugly, went unnoticed. They were also expected to project two selves -- one private and another public and the two were never compatible. While the private self hankered after pleasure the public self strictly adhered to the received standards of morality and social conduct. The sins committed by the private self, especially of the privileged upper class men, were camouflaged by the outward show of piety, advocacy of principles of morality, and sometimes plain priggishness.

These double standards of morality had serious implications for people in general and to the men and women of the feudal class and the newly emerging upper class who made their fortune in trade and industry. They were obliged to live double lives to escape the social and moral responsibilities imposed on them by society. Hypocrisy was the general outcome and normative state. Since they could not do much to alter the situation they took refuge in wearing the most convincing social masks, resorted to the most compelling lies, and privileged style over substance and learnt to stay afloat in social terms. Life would not be possible otherwise.

The Victorians also faced a spiritual crisis. Having believed for centuries that God made the world and created man in his own image, they were now required to accommodate the theory of evolution propounded by Charles Darwin. Darwin clearly stated in the *Origin of Species* that man has descended from lower animals, and the Victorians started wondering which part of the animal nature is still retained by them. While the Social Darwinists admired Darwin for offering an alternative perspective on the origin of man, a large majority of the Victorians were puzzled by the prospect of judging the success of human beings by the standards that were so far applied

only to animals. They felt that if indeed human nature is not so very different from that of the animals it needed to be curbed, or at very least severely restrained. Sex was one part of the human nature which the Victorians found to bear the closest affinity to animal nature and so any reference to it was actively discouraged, so much so that even the legs of a table were covered in order to discourage the impure thoughts they might inspire. All these restrictions on human thought and behaviour led to the breeding of ignorance about the facts of life. It was not possible to learn about life through religion or literature either.

The organized religion did precious little to set aside the apprehensions, fears and dilemmas experienced by the common people. Religion degenerated into a dry, meaningless mass of rituals offering nothing by way of spiritual consolation or enlightenment. Wilde points this out through the character of Canon Chasuble in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This church official is adept at adapting his sermons for any purpose. Depending on the particular need they can be joyful or distressing since they are replete with meaningless platitudes. English writers of the age such as Charles Dickens, whose novels otherwise wielded tremendous influence and brought about a change in the thinking of people in favour of the depressed sections of society, made no reference to sex and other intimate personal relationships. French novels such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* were publicly denounced but privately devoured. Wilde's plays make frequent references to French literature and how it was clandestinely consumed by the polite English people. Wilde's references to French literature, and indeed to all literature, lend a comic touch to his plays, but the irony is unmistakable. Some examples from his plays have been cited below to illustrate this point.

LADY BRACKNELL. Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. [Rising, and following ALGERNON.] I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. *French songs* I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me. (Wilde, *Earnest* 19; added emphasis)

DUMBY. Haven't got the slightest idea! Looks like an edition de luxe of a *wicked French novel*, meant specially for the English market. (Wilde, *Fan* 19; added emphasis)

LADY HUNSTANTON. It would do him a great deal of good, dear. Most women in London, nowadays, seem to furnish their rooms with nothing but orchids, foreigners, and *French novels*. But here we have the room of a sweet saint. Fresh natural flowers, books that don't shock one, pictures that one can look at without blushing. (Wilde, *Woman* 56; added emphasis)

The almost religious avoidance of references to anything remotely related to sex did not however mean that the Victorians were an asexual lot. They obviously professed something and practiced something quite different. They miserably failed to live up to the standards they set for themselves. For example, London alone had as many as 70,000 registered streetwalkers and twenty times as many customers! That certainly offers an eloquent commentary on the moral hypocrisy of the Victorians.

Education was another area of serious concern and it is of great importance to go into this question prior to attempting a study of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Like in respect of many other issues the Victorian had no clear idea of the importance of education for all. Although they realised the importance of education to remain competitive and in the forefront of social improvement and industrial growth, and enacted laws such as the Elementary Education Act 1870, mandating compulsory schooling for all children between the ages of five and thirteen,

they preferred to deny education to women. Women of privileged homes were educated privately by governesses or tutors. Education was thus very expensive and incomplete. The formal education imparted at schools and colleges too was not systematic. It hardly ever encouraged creativity and independent thinking. In most cases it led to no effect -- moral, religious or scientific -- on the young people. The feudal class had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and denying the masses access to education. That would keep them illiterate and ignorant and they would never muster enough courage to question the injustices they had to put up with every day. When she is told by the prospective groom for her daughter during the course of her interview with him that he knows nothing Lady Bracknell, the matriarch of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is hugely pleased and makes the following comment.

I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income? (Wilde, *Earnest* 25)

Lady Bracknell is also aware the ineffectuality of education. It was bland, unimaginative, uninspiring and unedifying. One of the two women protagonists of the play Cecily Cardew expresses her frustration with the education she receives from her governess Miss Prism, in the following words, while hurling her books down on the table: “Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!” (Wilde, *Earnest* 42). Similarly, Gwendolen attends the lengthy lectures by the University Extension Scheme on insipid subjects such as the “Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought” and quite naturally finds them revolting. Instead of paying attention to these lectures she preoccupies herself with pleasant thoughts of her prospective husband and the qualities he should have. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* too the Duchess of Berwick wonders: “My boy is excessively immoral. You wouldn’t believe at what hours he comes home. And he’s only left Oxford a few months—I really don’t know what they teach them there” (Wilde, *Fan* 13).

Aristocracy and the feudal class, which form the staple of all the plays of Wilde was going through a transition and transformation towards the end of the Victorian Era. For centuries they firmly believed that they were born to rule and expected that their right to rule would continue forever. They wished that traditions and customs that gave them so many privileges in the first place would be endlessly maintained. They had no useful occupation other than eating, partying and making love. It was in fact regarded as below their dignity to live by the sweat of their brow. Their attitude to society was one of paternalistic and given that attitude they viewed themselves in the role of the father taking society as a whole as a family. Despite this seemingly kind view they never hesitated to ill treat and exploit people and suppress signs on their part to question or revolt. As it is often said, ‘peers against the people’ was their norm rather than exception. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Lady Bracknell, for instance, immediately relates the reported death of a person from explosion to revolutionary outrage and wonders if the victim was not interested in social legislation. If he is indeed interested in social legislation, in her view, he has been well punished for his morbidity.

Feudal lords and ladies like her managed to remain on top of the society as rulers and trendsetters for many centuries but because of the economic readjustment and the emergence of the middle class as well as the wealthy non-Aristocratic upper class they found the economic foundation on which they were based gradually disappearing. In order to maintain their lifestyle

and to benefit from the huge wealth that was being generated by the hard working middle and upper classes they made some prudent economic and social adjustments. When economic imperatives dictated they opened up their ranks to the wealthiest of the other classes and allowed them to be a marginal part of themselves. The most celebrated case of this kind is the marriage of Charles Spencer-Churchill, 9th Duke of Marlborough to the American heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt in 1895 primarily. By means of this marriage of convenience the Duke was able to preserve the family seat, Blenheim Palace. The wealthy middle and upper classes were only too eager to join the ranks of the feudals chiefly by entering into marital alliances. One such marriage occurs in *The Importance of Being Earnest* between Algernon Moncrieff a blue-blooded aristocrat and Cecily Cardew who is born in the purple of commerce and not has risen from the ranks of aristocracy.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* was written against this backdrop and maybe because of this backdrop. Wilde was utterly uncomfortable with the social mores and moral norms which controlled his life and those of his compatriots. While continuing with some of the themes of his earlier plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* further widens their scope. For example, the theme of double identity resurfaces and it is, as in the previous plays, required to be assumed by characters because they are weighed down by social expectations and moral obligations. Similarly, the 'woman with a past' figures in this play as well, but this time round her actions are of deterministic value to the main protagonist rather than to herself. All the three plays discussed in this dissertation so far have ended in the marriage of one or more of the main protagonists. We are given to understand that these marriages are mostly a result of the partners being in love, although practical considerations do play a role. But in this play marriage is reduced to a business transaction, and unabashedly so, although love is tagged on to it as an embellishment.

While dealing with these themes *The Importance of Being Earnest* harks back to some of the greatest literary works of the earlier eras. The character of Gwendolen Fairfax bears the closest possible resemblance to Sophia Western of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* in that both the young women run away from home in pursuit of their lovers, and both have their parents come behind them in hot chase. The character of Gwendolen's lover, John Worthing, like Tom Jones, is a foundling brought up by a kindly gentleman but who finally turns out to be of respectable origins. John Worthing also reminds us of Mirabell the schemer-protagonist of William Congreve's play *The Way of the World* (1700) in terms of manipulating the situation to his advantage and overcoming the opposition of a formidable female relative of his ladylove and finally bringing his love story to a happy conclusion. In its depiction of lovers whose engagement runs into trouble because of misunderstandings, mistaken identities leading to strained relationships, possibility of an adult christening and the domineering presence of gorgon of an aunt the play also bears unmistakable similarity to Edward Moore's *The Foundling: A Comedy* (1748).

In addition to exploring some of the themes of the earlier plays, and partially deriving its inspiration from established classics, *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes into account new aspects of English society and culture and subjects them to close scrutiny while purporting to entertain the audience. If it was political corruption which was picked on and explored in *An Ideal Husband* it is the double standards of morality, social and religious hypocrisy and parvenu values that are exposed in this play. While widening the scope of the play and deepening his concern for his society Wilde also renders it better qualified as a dark drama because this time round he is dealing with deep-rooted malaise of his society. The shortcomings of society are not easily identifiable nor can they be easily faulted. Therefore he clothes his criticism with comedy



and achieves the desired results. Even at surface level devices such as lost and found child, depositing a child at a railway cloakroom in place of a three-volume novel, confusing dream with reality and inventing a dark double for oneself in order to escape social obligations contribute to the overall effect of the play as a dark drama. These elements have never been used so effectively in Wilde's earlier plays and for that reason *The Importance of Being Earnest* qualifies as a better dark drama than them.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is basically the story of four young people -- Algernon Moncrieff, John Worthing, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew -- who are obliged by the prevailing moral and social norms to either lead double lives or live in the world of dreams setting great store on false and superficial values. Algernon Moncrieff, who in many ways qualifies as a typical Wildean dandy, lives in his posh home in Half-Moon Street in London. We are given to understand that, like all other aristocrats, he has no gainful occupation and no stable source of income outside of what his estate might generate. He is deeply and heavily in debt because of his ostentatious lifestyle, but he does not seem to worry about it. When his butler Lane presents several envelopes, presumably containing bills, on a salver he nonchalantly tears them up. He has no intention of paying the bills. Nor is he in hurry to get married to a rich woman because he has only contemptuous attitude towards marriage. At several places in the First Act itself he expresses his contempt and dread of marriage. For example, when his friend John Worthing tells him that he has come up to town expressly to propose to Gwendolen he says, "But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. 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" (Wilde, *Earnest* 8). Algernon hates his relatives such as Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) who make heavy and persistent demands on his time, often obliging him to dine with people whom he hates. When he grows sick of these burdensome social obligations, or when he is pressed by his creditors to repay loans he escapes to the country on the pretext of visiting an imaginary invalid friend called Mr Bunbury.<sup>1</sup> He is also a compulsive eater and he seems to eat in order to distract himself and not because he is hungry: "When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy" (Wilde, *Earnest* 78). It is possible to interpret his eating disorder as a sign of depression brought on by his disappointment with life or as a means of suppressing his sexual urge by means of substitute gratification. The second of these interpretations seems more plausible because the Victorian society sought to vigorously suppress the sexual urge and unless one was enterprising enough there was no chance of satisfying the urge outside marriage.

His friend Jack (John Worthing) is based in the country and till almost the end of the play he has no knowledge of his parentage. He is a foundling adopted and brought up by the rich and kindly gentleman Mr Thomas Cardew. He has inherited Cardew's wealth and estate and currently has an income of between seven and eight thousand pounds a year in investments apart from controlling a huge estate of 1500 acres and homes in the country as well as in London. He is also the guardian of Cardew's granddaughter Cecily. Being no more than twenty nine himself he is required to play the responsible guardian to Cecily and be serious all the time. Cecily sometimes wonder that he is so serious that he cannot be quite well. Jack finds it all rather depressing and feels that it robs him of the spirit of life. Like Algernon he too has invented a very useful

profligate younger brother called Ernest who is given to extravagance and who frequently runs into shameful debts and consequently faces very difficult situations. He confesses to Algernon.

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. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple. (Wilde, *Earnest* 13)

On the pretext of caring for and reforming this irresponsible younger brother he visits London almost every weekend and once in London he assumes the name of Ernest and has a good time of it. In London he has fallen in love with Algernon's first cousin Gwendolen. This lady responds to his addresses of love primarily because his name is Ernest. The name Ernest has always held an irresistible fascination for her and she tells him so. To use terms borrowed from linguistics she, like Cecily later on, is fascinated not by the object or idea a word signifies but by the signifier itself.<sup>2</sup> She seems to think that if a word is so musical and so very greatly agreeable the object signified by the word also should be equally agreeable. At a different level her fascination for the name of Ernest exemplifies the superficiality that qualified the lives of the English aristocrats during the Victorian Era.

Women, especially the privileged women like Gwendolen, either preferred to live in a make believe world that is full of fascinating things and people, or were completely ignorant of the reality that prevailed beyond their social boundaries. Marriage with Gwendolen is however not going to be a cake walk for Jack in spite of the high economic status he enjoys. It is not only the conundrum of name but there are important social issues at stake here. The moment he proposes to Gwendolen he is reminded of the social barriers that separate him and her by her imposing and conservative mother Lady Bracknell. This lady subjects him to a close examination and elicits specific answers but unfortunately for Jack some of the information he gives her about himself is utterly unpalatable to her. When he tells her that he is a foundling discovered in a bag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station by Mr Cardew Lady Bracknell becomes immediately defensive and fears for the reputation of her family.

She is an aristocrat and she certainly does not want to give her daughter in marriage to a foundling whom she additionally suspects to be an illegitimate child: "As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion - has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society" (Wilde, *Earnest* 28). All her worst fears come crowding on her mind and she storms out in indignation after warning him that all communication between him and her daughter should cease forever. Jack is left wondering to himself about his misfortune and his future course of action. After a while Gwendolen sneaks in to assure him that she would continue to love him and be eternally devoted to him because his name has an irresistible attraction and that she would communicate with him on daily basis. The story of his romantic origins as related by her mother with derisive comments, instead of driving a wedge between them, has doubled his appeal to her.

True to her promise, Gwendolen runs away from London to Jack's country seat the Manor House in Woolton, Hertfordshire. Even before her arrival Algernon, taking advantage of Jack's absence from home has come there, on one of his Bunburying trips and has already entrenched himself in

the house as well as in the affections of Cecily. He introduces himself as Ernest Worthing, the profligate younger brother of Jack having heard from Jack earlier that Cecily has been paying plenty of attention to Ernest from his accounts of him. It takes him no time whatever to win the heart of Cecily because, like Gwendolen, she too is enamoured of the name of Ernest. She frankly admits to Algernon.

You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone 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. (Wilde, *Earnest* 62)

Cecily has so far led a highly protected and well cared for life. The education she is supposed to be receiving from Miss Prism is utterly uninspiring to her. She hates it with the whole of her heart, and in a way it constitutes an eloquent commentary on the entire British system of education at that time. To distract herself she entertains pleasant dreams, and given the general social atmosphere of the time, most of her dreams concern her future husband who should of course be invariably named Ernest. Algernon's introducing himself as Ernest Worthing does the trick. In course of their conversation it is further revealed that the putative Ernest has been full of her dreams and her diary entries testify to the fact. In her imagination, several months ago, she fell in love with him, got engaged to him, exchanged letters with him, broke her engagement because she thinks that unless an engagement is not broken at least once it would not be serious enough. Algernon's materialising before her in flesh as blood is only a continuation of her dream!

Both Gwendolen and Cecily thus demonstrate the shallowness of the values that placed high premium on appearances and surface level attraction while themselves remaining innocent. In this context David Parker says,

Gwendolen and Cecily rely on beautiful untrue things as much as their suitors do, but instead of deceiving the world through imposture, they demand that the world accept the pleasing fantasies they choose to project onto it. (Parker 185)

By means of their obsession with the name of Ernest, these young women forge identities of men they wish to marry to suit their wishes. Their suitors on the other hand try to achieve moral liberation by playing tricks that are not too far removed from that of true rogues and impostors. As Parker says, they discover "human freedom in protean identity" (Parker 185), and do not mind adopting identities to suit particular occasions. Bunbury and Ernest serve as their alter-egos. Things that they cannot do openly they do through these imaginary characters. Bunbury and Ernest are indicative of the double lives that most feudal lords and the *nouveau riche* of the Victorian society were required to live so as not to destabilise the moral edifice. It is interesting to note that neither of these male protagonists gains the courage or will power to finally discard the ideology that has obliged them to live duplicitous lives.

They belong to the aristocracy, with countless privileges attendant on it, and it would not be in their long term interest to question the prevalent ideology. It may also be that it indicates the helplessness of the people of the Victorian Era. They were not comfortable with their society but they did not question its shortcomings either. It is true that when swayed by emotion and as part of his defence against the onslaught of Lady Bracknell Algernon says that he does not care two hoots for social possibilities: "Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care twopence about social possibilities" (Wilde, *Earnest* 89). And Jack freely forgives Miss Prism for her supposedly becoming a mother outside wedlock and even questions the double standards of morality applicable differently to men and women: "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” (Wilde, *Earnest* 89). Their enthusiasm would not for sure sustain for long. They are bound to be drawn into vortex of Victorian hypocrisy before long. Jack’s own unexpected arrival at the Manor House in Woolton, a short while after Algernon came, dressed in the deepest mourning signified by all black clothes, and his declaration that his brother Ernest has died in Paris sets the process of unmasking in motion. Both Jack and Algernon, now mistaken by Cecily, Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble, to be brothers, are obliged to enact reconciliation, but privately bicker with Jack gruffly asking Algernon to clear off and return to London by the earliest available train. Not that Algernon takes it seriously. In spite of his intention in coming there being a light-hearted Bunburying and in spite of his grave misgivings about marriage, he has fallen headlong in love with Cecily. That she is the heiress to a huge fortune seems to have added to her attraction to him. This is a point which would be later reinforced by his aunt Lady Bracknell.

The immediate problem both the men now face is their name. In what appears to be a tribute to love they are now willing to be re-Christened as Ernest and they make separate appointments for that evening with Canon Chasuble for the purpose. While they are so distracted and busy with their preparations for Christening, Gwendolen puts in a sudden appearance and runs straight into Cecily. The two young women start off on a cordial enough note but soon start bickering over the question of to which of them Ernest Worthing has proposed. They however discover before long that Algernon and Jack have both been playing tricks on them, and that there really is nobody called Ernest. Consequently they realise that they are not engaged to be married to anyone. When obliged to come out with the truth Algernon and Jack narrate the circumstances under which they had to assume false names, the important factor being their love. The women forgive them and readmit them to their affections but there are still formidable obstacles to be overcome. Victorian society imposes itself on them in the form of Lady Bracknell who comes there in hot pursuit of her daughter.

Lady Bracknell first ensures that Cecily is of respectable parentage and not a foundling like Jack. Cecily is the grand-daughter of Mr. Thomas Cardew who had three addresses and her family solicitors are Messrs. Markby, Markby, and Markby which is a well known legal firm. She has certificates of birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles; both the German and the English variety. Once satisfied with her parentage Lady Bracknell goes on to enquire about her fortune and to her pleasant surprise she is told that she has a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. Lady Bracknell is greatly impressed by this last piece of information, given the fact that Algernon is debts. She immediately gives her consent to Algernon’s marriage with Cecily. However, in his capacity of Cecily’s guardian Jack is not ready to give his consent to her marriage with Algernon unless Lady Bracknell consents to his own marriage with Gwendolen. That is still not possible because of his supposed dubious origins. As Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen prepare to leave the chance mention of Miss Prism by Canon Chasuble and her physical appearance thereafter leads to Lady Bracknell’s questioning her regarding what happened to the male child who was her charge twenty eight years ago. It is soon established that Miss Prism, in a moment of mental abstraction, for which she has never forgiven herself, placed the manuscript of her three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality in the bassinette of the perambulator and placed the baby in her bag and deposited it in the cloakroom of Victorian Station. Jack has in his possession this particular bag and Miss Prism identifies it as hers. Lady Bracknell then informs the confused and bewildered Jack that

he is the son of her sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently the elder brother of Algernon. All hurdles, social and moral, are thus removed and the decks are cleared for the union of the two pairs of lovers. Order is restored and established norms are reinforced, but in the meantime they have been proved to be hallow, anti-human and against nature and the audience would know for sure that they are fit only to be discarded so that there will be room for a better order of things to come about.

Charity and reformation, two virtues that the Victorians believed they are practicing are turned on their head in this play. The charity of Algernon evidenced by his frequent visits to his permanent invalid friend Mr Bunbury is proved to be false and a mere pretext to escape the unbearable social obligations and the consequent moral restraint and psychological constriction. The charity practiced by Jack in caring for and bringing an orphaned girl, namely Cecily, too proves to be too much for him to maintain and he invents ways and means of circumventing responsibilities and being himself rather than answering the description of an ideal guardian. Being an ideal guardian obviously robs him of the chances of happiness and enjoyment in life and renders his existence positively sterile. Reformation, as attempted by Jack in respect of his imaginary younger brother Ernest and by Algernon on himself ultimately proves to be false and untrue. It was just that society expected people to be extremely untrue to themselves, go against their nature, and when they refused they, especially the men, were regarded as profligate and anti-social. They were asked to reform themselves and reformation itself primarily meant that such 'unfortunate' men should be brought in line with the established moral and social norms.

Canon Chasuble and Miss Prism, the preceptors who are given the charge of educating the people in general and Cecily respectively maintain their moral stance only at the surface level. Beneath the surface they are not very different from the other 'proper' Victorians who preach something and practice something entirely different. Canon Chasuble merely parrots the Biblical precepts and has no true understanding of the scripture which is proven by the fact that he has never published a book. Moreover his sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness is so amorphous that it can be adapted for almost any occasion, joyful or distressing. It certainly suggests his profound ignorance and changeability. He is more than willing to bend religion to particular needs. Miss Prism preaches temperance and warns Cecily that good looks are a snare to be avoided. She constantly reminds Cecily of her duties and responsibilities but she herself abandons them the moment she sees Canon Chasuble. She and Canon Chasuble flirt with each other and conceal their lust under a deluge of metaphors. They together thus expose the dryness and pretence that have crept into the field of education and religious institutions.

The play is suffused with the philosophy of Decadent Aestheticism which privileges surfaces, superficiality and outward decorum without much regard for the moral basis of art. Many of the utterances of the characters fit this bill. In the words of Lady Bracknell Algernon has 'nothing,' but he looks 'everything.' Cecily does not believe Algernon's statement that he has pretended to be her guardian's brother in order that he might have an opportunity of meeting her, but she appreciates the 'wonderful beauty' of his words. Gwendolen thinks that in matters of grave importance style, not sincerity, is more important. The obsession of both these women with so shallow a thing as the name of Ernest is indicative of the importance they assign to superficial categories. But all this superficiality and concern with the surfaces is fraught with profound significance, if one can see it. What is implied here is that if marrying a person for the name is absurd, it is equally ridiculous to marry one on the basis of the wealth of the parents. These women are required to be superficial by the force of circumstances and the culture of hypocrisy of which they are an inalienable part. After marrying their respective beaux they would certainly

dwindle into housewives and bear each more than a dozen children and perhaps even die in one of the childbirths. They would be imprisoned by narrow domesticity and pass on their petty concerns to the next generation. Their men on the other hand would probably invent another variety of Bunburying and continue to practice deception in order to escape the many responsibilities, this time round, of married life. And all of them will continue their arrogance and aristocratic blindness to the suffering of the vast majority of underprivileged people. Here then lies the dark comedy and it is important to see it, feel it and experience it and not be carried away by the entertainment value of the play.

Wilde certainly intended his play to be seen that way. He witnessed, experienced and was finally victimised by the hypocrisy that prevailed all around him. The worst part of it was that success was predicated on hypocrisy and hypocrisy itself was billed as social progress. Walter Winston Kenilworth supports this reading of the play and therefore this chapter is best concluded in his words.

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