

## The Importance of Being Earnest

# Symbolism in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest

By

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### Abstract

Though categorized as a Comedy of Manners, Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest is nonetheless enriched with insinuated Symbolism. This research traces the Symbolic manifestations in the play's language, setting, symbolic motifs, and in its symbols as such. The analysis finds that the subtlety with which these manifestations are handled checks them from hindering the humor of the comedy in any way, rather, they endow it with an intelligent enhancement and render the social criticism more acute.

الرمزية في مسرحية أوسكار وايلد  
"أهمية أن تكون صادقاً"

تارا طاهر الدباغ  
كلية اللغات - جامعة صلاح الدين

شيلان خليل جنيد  
ماجستير في الأدب الانكليزي

رغم تصنيفها كملهاة اجتماعية، إلا أن مسرحية "أهمية أن تكون صادقاً" لأوسكار وايلد غنية برمزياتها التي يتناول هذا البحث مظاهرها في موضوع ولغة المسرحية، وكذلك في إطارها الزماني والمكاني وفي رموزها ويتوصل التحليل إلى أن التورية الحاذقة لهذه المظاهر الرمزية لا تحد من فكاهة ومرح المسرحية بأي شكل، وأنها على العكس من ذلك، تضيف عليهما عمقاً ذكياً، فضلاً عن شحذها للنقد الاجتماعي المطروح

### I. Introduction

In conformity with the Comedy of Manners, Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) exposes the hypothetically contemporary society that it portrays, namely in its case, the Victorian society. Irony, Wilde's most powerful weapon in attacking social hypocrisies and inconsistencies, is felt in this play in the very fact that what appears realistic turns out quite often to be Symbolic. Deeming distancing his play from reality necessary for sound criticism, he alienates its world by presenting it as a nonexistent, childish, and dream-like fantasy which only *resembles* reality, hence the indispensable role of Symbolism evidenced in the following sections.

### II. Language

True to the Comedy of Manners, wit is the criterion by which a character is evaluated in the world portrayed in the play. According to Schanker, Wilde takes advantage of this major feature to endow his clever language with a verbal mask-like quality symbolic of and suitable to the people who use it (155). Symons moreover maintains that Wilde eludes all evil by reducing the real world to a childish level of innocence through his manipulation of language (75). The resulting fantastical presentation is in the true spirit of Symbolist drama.

In an ironical and paradoxical twist in the comedy at hand, its harmless childishness is mainly arrived at through the characters' *intellectual* conversation with its exaggerated, sophisticated, and artificial expressions of urban culture. This stems from Wilde's reproducing reality in his own way, namely, using his characters and situations merely as outlets for his linguistic intellectual game to provide the chance to utter what he wants to be articulated. It thus becomes obvious that language is of primary importance to Wilde for he places characters and situations second to it, and treats them as its dramatic presentation, which, in turn, renders them symbols of the language.

This sequence of priority could be discerned in the fact that Wilde structurally links the play together by the Symbolist feature of repetition, manifested in that of certain situations which themselves stem from the intentional repetition in the language itself. A case in point is both

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Gwendolen and Cecily's fascination with the name Ernest, which to them is of more importance than its holder. They are, in effect, in love with the name, a preoccupation that causes all their ensuing actions and reactions which mainly are further linguistic and situational repetitions. In other words, it is this redundant linguistic feature of the name that defines the characters and determines the plot.

The Symbolist repetition is obvious not only in both girls' fascination with the same name, but also in their expression of it. Gwendolen says to Jack (whose name she thinks is Ernest) that "there is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence" (263; Act 1). Talking to Algernon, who is also masquerading as Ernest, Cecily likewise claims that "there is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence" (288; Act 2). This situational and linguistic parallelism is even more pronounced when the two girls discover the men's real identities, as their language and actions become almost identical. Maintaining that "a gross deception has been practiced on both" of them, Gwendolen appeals to Cecily as her "poor wounded Cecily," to which Cecily replies "my sweet wronged Gwendolen" (295; Act 2). To further emphasize their unison, they actually speak together when they are later reconciled with the young men, saying: "Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier," to which the men reply, also together: "Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon" (301; Act 3).

Due to the similarity of their situations, the characters no longer talk or act as individuals but as one person, a chorus-like behavior symbolic of the lack of individualism in Victorian society where people act as types defined and controlled by social conventions. As presented, the characters are mere puppets symbolic of the whole society, which boosts the comedy and intensifies the feel of innocent fantasy, even while exposing social evils. The absurdity of expression, furthermore, becomes symbolic of that of the society where such language is normal. This linguistic presentation justifies Kohl's description of the refined language as "the symbol of the society decadence" (231), and Ellmann's belief the function of the dialogue to be the unmasking of themes and situations (422).

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Manipulating the language to present the characters as puppets in an absurd world, deprives it of its communicative aspect and prevents any emotional involvement. This enables the audience to ponder the deeper linguistic presentation, thus fulfilling an aim of Symbolism in drama.

### III. Setting

The "luxuriously and artistically furnished" "morning-room in Algernon's flat" (253; Act 1) in London, establishes his aristocratic lifestyle from the very beginning of the play. In a departure from the Comedy of Manners in its most original form, and in a further act of Symbolism, not much is changed in the presented lifestyle by the movement of the scene in the second and third Acts to Jack's Manor House in the country side, as the audience is not meant to take what meets the eye at face value, but to appreciate the deeper Symbolic connotations. Thus it is gradually realized that the superficial changes in the setting, which provide a guise for the two young men's double identities, are symbolic of the superficiality of the differences in their split characters, for their shallowness remains intact regardless of the changed settings or of the personality they assume. Likewise, it is gradually revealed that the beauty of nature is not presented as such, but that its details are used symbolically.

In keeping with this intention, and instead of creating the prototypical atmosphere of simplicity and depth of character associated with nature, Wilde uses it to set an artificial and superficial mood stressing the *urbanity* rather than the naivety of its inhabitants. Just as the sound of Algernon's music and that of the electronic bell in the opening scene (253, 260, 262-3, 269; Act 1), help to stress the atmosphere of wealth and superficial culture and refinement, so do the different flowers, particularly the pink roses and the Marechal Niels, in the Manor house's garden (274, 279; Act 2), which, though set in the heart of nature, is a "well-kept" (293; Act 2) *cultivated* garden. Moreover, Cecily's apparent commune with nature in watering the flowers (274, 285, 287; Act 2), is poignantly ironic, for at such moments she fantasizes about an artificiality, namely, Jack's fictitious brother, in which instance she is no different from Gwendolen, the city girl, who also

fantasizes about the name Ernest which she takes to be Jack's real name (263; Act 1).

Although, in a traditional symbolic use of flowers (Ferber 75), Algernon compares Cecily's beauty to that of a pink rose (279; Act 2), yet flowers are also used as symbols encompassing all people. Gwendolen claims that she "had no idea there were any flowers in the country," to which Cecily replies that "flowers are as common [in the country]... as people are in London" (293; Act 2), further denoting the similarity between flowers / people whether in the city or in the countryside.

Such instances banish any severe contrast between the settings by highlighting the sameness of their inhabitants and by encompassing them all in the light – toned criticism. Thus, the striking apparent contrasts in the scenes function, paradoxically, in a subtle symbolic manner, to strengthen the mockery of the adamant social values to which changes in locations are in actual fact, irrelevant.

### **IV. Symbolic Motifs**

#### **IV. 1. The Earnestness Fantasy**

In line with his philosophy that "we should treat all trivial things very seriously" (qtd. in Ellmann 422), Wilde's description of his play as "a trivial comedy for serious people," indicates his assumption that his viewers will adopt an earnest attitude towards his ideas which, though delivered in a shallow and trivial connotation, are actually most serious. In this sense, the adjective "Earnest" in the title symbolizes the attitude that Wilde considers to be necessary on the part of the audience for a thorough appreciation of the play.

When the audience puts to practice the required earnestness, it comes to realize that Wilde's exposure of the social snobbery and hypocrisy is food for serious thought. It also realizes that the characters are quite earnest in their adoption of shallow moral codes which, as thus presented throughout the whole play, is rendered an ironic motif symbolic of their triviality in their very earnestness.

The play abounds in instances reflecting this perverse kind of seriousness; an obvious example is the name Ernest itself. Gwendolen and

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Cecily are earnest in their condition that the name of their prospective husbands should be Ernest; the young men are likewise keen on marrying them and are willing to change their names for that purpose. However, no mention is made of the characters of any of the concerned parties, nor is any serious emotional response exhibited for the deception practiced by the two men. This is in keeping with the spirit of the play where a person who "is so very serious" could be under suspicion of not being "quite well" (274; Act 2), and where "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (301; Act 3).

Such instances reveal the triviality of the characters' conception of earnestness which leaves out the important and concerns itself with the inessential and the affected. Indeed, Lady Bracknell deems Jack "to be displaying signs of triviality" when he demonstrates his happiness for finally overcoming the obstacles facing his marriage to Gwendolen (313; Act 3). Jack's reply to her in the very last speech of the play that he has "now realized for the first time in [his] life the vital Importance of Being Ernest" (313; Act 3) prevents any confusion in the viewers' minds who would be expecting reactions more normal than Lady Bracknell's. He reminds the audience that two different kinds of earnestness are evoked by the writer: that of the title, which symbolizes the necessary seriousness on their part in their approach to the play, and that of the play itself, which runs as a motif paradoxically symbolizing the triviality of the characters who adopt it, and for an understanding of which the earnestness of the audience is essential.

### **IV. 2. The Science of Life**

Maintaining that the 'Science of Life' was a prevalent concept at the time of the play, Bunnell concludes that Wilde uses his presentation of it as a "broadside at [his] contemporaries" who took it "very seriously and [who wrote] some humorless and earnest books" about it (13). In this line of argument, the science of life motif is Wilde's symbol of the evil and the absurdity of such an approach to life.

Wilde establishes the motif very early in the play. It is only the third speech of the first Act in which Algernon says that he does not play the

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piano "accurately" because "as far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is [his] forte" and that he "keep[s] science for life" (253; Act 1). Since it is revealed as the play unfolds that this attitude is exhibited by many other characters besides Algernon, it could be concluded that this speech proclaims Wilde's intention of portraying an accurate and objective picture of society much in the scientific spirit of analysis, and of leaving, as Brasol phrases it, "sentimentality for others" (262).

Wilde's deliberate detachment of his characters from any serious emotional involvement runs like a pattern in the play. An example is Lady Bracknell's assessment of Jack as a possible husband for her daughter. Her "[pencil and note- book in hand]," she ticks away items on a "list of eligible young men" which she has prepared in collaboration with the "Duchess of Bolton." Her major concerns are shallow facts such as whether Jack's "town house" is on the "fashionable side" of "Belgrave Square," whereas she lists the question of his parenthood as one of the "minor matters." When she realizes its obscurity, and true to the science of life approach, she advises Jack "to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex" (266-8; Act 1). She is completely oblivious to the emotional value of parenthood and approaches the situation as a problem to which a factual solution could be found.

The force of the science of life motif is no where better illustrated than in its presence even in the characters' imagination which, by definition, should be absolutely irrelevant to science. Planning to marry Gwendolen, Jack says that he will end the lie of his having a brother by pretending that "he died in Paris of apoplexy." When reminded by Algernon of the scientific fact that apoplexy is hereditary, he decides on "a severe chill" as the most suitable ailment to get "rid of [his brother]" (270; Act 1). Later, Algernon tries to prevent Jack from being christened as Ernest by raising scientific objections in reminding him of this imaginary death of the fictitious brother, and in warning him that his "constitution" might not be strong enough to undergo the process of christening. When Jack reminds him that he himself had said that a chill was not hereditary, he rejoins that "it is now" for "science is always making wonderful improvements in

things" (298; Act 2). Both Jack and Algernon incorporate science in this figment of imagination.

The above examples, collectively with many others in the play, make up the motif of the science of life, symbolizing the inhumanity of the concept. Such a constantly detached and rational approach is shown to deprive humanity of its essence of values, and to render life itself a cold experimental speculation where no feelings are allowed.

### IV. 3. The Double Life

Wilde introduces the double life motif to trivialize the frigid Victorian moral codes and to expose the hypocrisy of his time. The motif is presented in two imaginary characters, namely Ernest and Bunbury, who are used by Jack and Algernon as a means of giving reign to what Danson describes as their "individual desire" to be "fully and joyfully free" (12), thus providing a symbolic escape for the two young men from the repressing, affected, and shallow moral codes.

Algernon creates the character of Bunbury to escape his detested social obligations; he makes this clear when he says to Jack that he has "invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that [he] may be able to go down into the country whenever [he] choose[s]" (259; Act 1). Hence he describes himself as a Bunburyist, a nomenclature that thus symbolizes liberation of social restraints and indulgence in one's personal inclinations, a freedom that could only be attained in such a conventional society through deception. He classifies Jack as a Bunburyist too when the latter tells him of the fictitious brother whom *he* has created to escape to town from his duties as a guardian to Cecily which oblige him "to adopt a very high moral tone" which does not "conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness" (258-9; Act 1).

The fact that the imaginary Bunbury is constantly ill and that the "high moral tone" that Jack has to adopt as a man of responsibility is not conducive to his health, symbolizes the morbidity of Bunburyism as well as that of its necessity in a society where individuality is regarded as an eccentricity, and where, to be accepted, one has to abide by its rules regardless of their inconsistency and superficiality. Moreover, Bunburyism



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covers both town and country since Algernon has to use it in order to enjoy his freedom in the country, and Jack has to use it to liberate himself of his responsibilities and escape to the city.

Jack conditions ending his deception of the imaginary brother on his wish of marriage to Gwendolen coming true (260; Act 1). Ironically, when all the deceptions are ended in the final Act where even Algernon announces the death of Bunbury, and when his wish of marriage does come true (303; Act 3), so does his deception. In a symbolic indication, Bunburyism will continue as it is revealed that Jack's name is really Ernest and that he does have a younger brother who turns out to be Algernon (311, 313; Act 3). Ernest, so far an imaginary brother and a symbol of deception, mutates into a reality, a turn of events which is symbolic of the inescapability of Bunburyism in a society that itself is highly deceptive, and where "the truth is rarely pure and never simple" (259; Act 1).

The depicted shallow characters have no incentive or motivation for any serious action to better their lives, instead, they choose escape as an outlet. The double life motif is thus comprehensive in a comedy that intentionally avoids any direct or serious confrontation, and that allows no development in its puppet-like type characters who represent the whole depicted society, and who constantly abide by their social codes that amount to affectation and deception. This motif thus proves true Algernon's statement that "nothing [would] induce [him] to part with Bunbury" (260; Act 1), and brings to light its dominant prevalence.

### **IV.4. Rechristening**

The rechristening motif, obviously relevant in the childish world of the play, presents itself in Jack and Algernon's desire to be rechristened as Ernest. Their fixation on a religious ceremony associated with childhood is a constant symbolic reminder that the characters play at life rather than actually live it in a mature manner, and that not even religious practices are immune from their childish handlings.

The two men's intention to be rechristened is symbolic of their wish to embark on their new married life by ending the deception of their names. Yet, in the play's paradise of innocence, there is no need to be purged of

evil because it too is harmless, and in such a world rechristening would be absurd.

True enough, Jack and Algernon's intention to be baptized, which Ellmann considers as a wish for regeneration (422) is prevented by Lady Bracknell, the symbol of shallow Victorian conventions. She thinks that for Algernon to be baptized at his age is "grotesque and irreligious"(308; Act 3), and she prevents Jack from being rechristened by revealing his true parenthood, which in turn leads to the discovery that his name *is* Ernest (313; Act 3). Her hindrance of the christenings is symbolic of her society's rejection of change, a rejection that does not allow the intended regeneration to take place, and that further renders the prevented ceremonies symbolic of the inflexibility of upper class Victorian society where no substantial change ever takes place.

### **V. Symbols**

#### **V. 1. Masks**

The play in its entirety is about masking as all its complications stem from Gwendolen and Cecily's fascination with the name Ernest, which Jack and Algernon adopt to liberate themselves from, in Worthen's words, "earthly concerns and from social restraints"( 94). Kohl furthers this idea by referring the necessity of masking to the play's paradoxical truth of the impossibility of actually being moral while claiming to be so. He argues that all the characters wear the mask of "social decorum" behind which "lurk" their "true motives" (269).

As no actual mask is ever used, this comprehensive notion of masking is conveyed only by implication, which renders it more poignant. Indeed, no clear discernment between reality and affectation is allowed, which endows the play with an elusiveness symbolic of that of its characters whose reality is submerged by all the pretence which has become second nature to them.

The resultant elusiveness alerts the audience to consider the different perspectives of the multi-layered meanings as flashes of truth constantly mix with affectation in the dialogue. Lady Bracknell for example, whom Schanker describes as the embodiment of the kind of superficial society which Wilde "delights to attack" (155), unwittingly reveals her snobbery,

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hypocrisy, and narrow-minded amorality, while pretending righteousness. She does not find Cecily appealing nor does she approve of her proposed marriage to her nephew. However, when she learns that Cecily has a "hundred and thirty thousand pounds," she immediately changes her mind and consequently even finds her "a most attractive young lady" (304; Act 3). She is masked even in relation with her husband, for she has "never undeceived him on any question" because she "consider[s] it wrong" to do so (302; Act 3). The younger generation that she often opposes is likewise masked. Gwendolen and Cecily herself are revealed to be only pretending delicacy and politeness. When thinking that they are engaged to the same man, Cecily goes as far as saying that such is not the "time for wearing the shallow mask of manners," and they both unceremoniously reveal their antagonism to each other (292; Act 2).

The twisted morality is not unique to the upper class for it is also betrayed by Cecily's governess and companion Miss Prism who, though "remotely connected with education," puts on the mask of "cultiva[tion]" and "respectability" (308-9; Act 3). Moreover, her moral façade hides her unsympathetic nature which is revealed when she exhibits no remorse for having neglectfully lost a baby of whom she used to be in charge (309-311; Act 3), and when she shows more concern for having lost the manuscript of the worthless novel that she was writing at the time. (275; Act 2).

It thus becomes clear that Wilde spares no one in his presentation of masking through which he achieves his comic exposure. He symbolically encompasses all ages and classes of both genders in it, putting to task all the members of the audience, and furthering his request for the necessity of earnestness to grasp the meaning behind the deceptive pretence.

### **V. 2. Food.**

Portrayed as a substitute for other appetites, different ideas are symbolized by the carnal need for food. Often present on the stage, food is sometimes as articulate as a speaking character.

A relation between food and sexual desire is established by Algernon from the opening scene when he comments on Jack's eating the bread and butter sandwiches as if he "were married to [Gwendolen] already" (255; Act 1). He substitutes the sandwiches with Gwendolen and suggests that Jack's

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eating them is a symbol of his desire for her, which reflects on his own greediness in eating the cucumber sandwiches as symbolic of *his* strong sexual drive (253,255; Act 1). Later, when their plans of marriage are hindered by Gwendolen and Cecily, they fight over muffins and tea-cakes (297-299; Act 2), their symbolic way of expressing their desire which Bunnell finds to be frustrated by these domineering women. Bunnell also attributes the two young women's use of food to vent their feelings of animosity when thinking that they are both engaged to the same man (Act Two 293-4), to their desire and dream of that man. (28).

In line with the childishness of the characters, this craving for food could also be regarded as the young people's way of avoiding any mature emotional involvement. In this sense, their resorting to food is symbolic of their tendency to trivialize serious issues in tense situations. In agreement with this understanding of the food symbolism, Ellmann regards Cecily's observation that Jack and Algernon's "eating muffins" "looks like repentance" (300; Act 3), as a trivialization of the religious concept of expiation, into muffins (422).

Such "substitution of a gentle greediness for fearsome lechery," and the expression of superficiality via food symbolism (Ellmann 422), endows vice with a feeling of innocence. It is thus one of Wilde's ways of preserving the harmless childishness, and of conveying the comedy.

### V. 3. Diaries

As writing is reserved to female characters only, it becomes symbolic of their imagination. Again, and true to the spirit of the play, their fantasies are not allowed a clear distinction from reality.

Cecily "keep[s] a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of [her] life" that she might otherwise forget, those secrets being purely imaginary (275, 286; Act 2). Danson finds that in her imagined story with Ernest, she writes the romance of her life before actually living it (80). Gwendolen's diary is of no less importance to her; she never travels without it for she holds that "one should always have something sensational to read" (292; Act 2), which betrays that she too, like Cecily, outpours her vivid imagination into it. However, when they quarrel over who was first engaged to Ernest, they both produce their diaries (292; Act 2) as official

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documents rather than as records of their fantasies, thus furthering the confusion between reality and imagination.

In the light of this confusion between fact and fantasy, Miss Prism's three-volume novel (275; Act 2) could also be regarded as a diary; indeed Cecily believes that "memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels" that they read (275; Act 2). Miss Prism wrote such a novel in her youth (275; Act 2) when she was impressed by romance and sentimentality which impaired her vision of life. Still, although now she is aware that poetic justice is confined only to "fiction" where "the good [end] happily, and the bad unhappily" (275; Act 2), she too gets her happy ending when her desire of marrying Canon Chasuble unexpectedly comes true (313; Act 3), in yet another instance of fantasy coming true.

The common notion of diaries as outlets for secret thoughts that are not meant to be made public is twisted in the play whose characters make no secret of their diaries. Cecily goes so far as saying that "her record of her own thoughts and impressions [is] consequently meant for publication" (286; Act 2). True enough, the imaginary entered secrets are made public when they come true, which renders the diaries symbolic, not only of the overlapped fact and fantasy, but of the double identity motif in general.

### **Conclusion**

The Importance of Being Earnest mainly aims at exposure. It does not shock or offend, but stimulates thoughtful laughter and recognition, hence the suggestive approach of Symbolism. Introducing a childish utopian world where the symbolic meanings are hidden behind the wit and the comedy, the play is, in consequence, endowed with an intended artificiality despite its realistic presentation. The resulting atmosphere is in line with the mixed earnestness and triviality, the merged fact and fantasy, the absurd, sometimes even the nonsensical, rationalism, the attention to language that nonetheless fails to connect the characters emotionally, the different settings that emphasize the sameness rather than the distinctions between their inhabitants, the childish adults who play at life, the innocent conveyance of evil, and with the presentation as a whole where the Comedy of Manners is lined and strengthened by the Symbolism.

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It is thus through a response to atmosphere that the intellectual interest of the audience is aroused, not by a naturalistic succession of actions. Indeed, the aroused laughter itself is symbolic of the comic eye-opening experience that the audience undergoes as it reaches a full realization of the portrayed society.

This realization on the part of the audience is thoroughly realistic, though Wilde paradoxically brings it about by employing Symbolism. He undermines social conventions by symbolic implication and strips society of all its trappings, leaving the audience laughing at its world about which it no longer has any illusions.

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