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Dualism in Oscar Wilde's
The Importance of Being Earnest

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Title: *Dualism in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Abstract: In this essay I explore the dualism in Oscar Wilde's most famous society comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*. My thesis is that Wilde employed the well-established Late Victorian concept of double identity as well as a dualistic theme in the play, revealed in the language and in the strategies of lying, in order to exploit the hypocrisy of the society, i.e. the ruling class. The focus of the argument has been to analyse the characters, the double language and the lying in the play in a historical, a biographical and, in part, a colonial context to disclose a higher intent of the work and to fully understand the wit in the play.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, post-colonialism, identity, characters, language, lying, dualism, duplicity, satire

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Characters and Connotations.....	6
3. Language and Lying.....	12
4. Conclusion.....	19
5. Works Cited.....	21

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde was one of the most successful playwrights of his day but he was also a complex person full of contradictions. Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, the son of a distinguished surgeon and a nationalist poetess. He went to Trinity College in Dublin and then to Magdalen College in Oxford. After graduating he was forced to earn a living and moved to London, where his fellow Irishmen Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats were settled. Wilde established himself as lecturer and a writer for periodicals but foremost as a spokesperson for the aesthetic movement whose credo was “art for art’s sake.” In 1882 he visited America on a successful lecture tour where he claimed that “to disagree with three fourths of all England on all points of view is one of the first elements of sanity” (Norton 1720). He married in 1884 and had two sons. He wrote three volumes of short fiction with little success but excelled as a critic of literature and of society in essays like “The Decay of Lying” (1889), “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1890) and “The Critic as Artist” (1890). His only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) created a sensation but his most outstanding success came as a writer of society comedies staged in London between 1892 and 1895, including *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. However, in 1895, after having a relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, he was accused of homosexuality and was sentenced to prison with hard labour for two years. In prison he wrote the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) and his prose confession and critique of himself, *De Profundis* (1905). When he was released, in 1897, he was a ruined man, divorced and declared a bankrupt. He went into exile to France, where he lived under an assumed name until his death in 1900.

The duality of Wilde is fascinating as well as confusing. He was a man of numerous identities and his position in society was ambivalent. He was at the same time a colonized Irishman *and* a socialite, a husband *and* a homosexual, a successful playwright accepted in high society *and* a socialist. He was “the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings” (Holland 3). As a dandy he dressed in colourful costumes in contrast to the sober black suits of the Late Victorian middle classes and yet he was admitted to good society because of his charismatic manners and witty conversation. As a spokesperson for the “aesthetes,” who revolted against the earnestness of Victorian ideals and enjoyed

mocking middle-class opinions, Wilde challenged and shocked his audience by using sensational imagery, hyperbole, dandyism and decadence. In his own life and in his art he criticized society; he “criticized his audience while he entertained it” (Peter Hall, *Guardian*), and like a jester he was allowed to do so. But when he was arrested he went from fool to martyr, from comic to tragic. He became a mere Irishman and commoner who had dared to have had “an intimate relationship with the son of a peer of the realm” (Cave vii). Three days before he died, when asked about his life, Wilde said: “Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple” (Wilde qtd. in Holland 3).

The last line echoes one of the characters in Wilde’s most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest – A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (1895), a play very much concerned with double identities and the question of what is true. My thesis is that Wilde, in this play, employed the well-established Late Victorian concept of double identity as well as a dualistic theme, revealed in the language and in the strategies of lying, in order to exploit the hypocrisy of society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there are two principal male characters, Jack and Algy, who have invented aliases that enable them to lead a double life. The dualistic theme is not only displayed in the characters’ use of double identities but in the language of the play and the play as a whole. The name Ernest is a pun and the dialogue is full of contradictions, misunderstandings and lies which are true and vice versa: the characters say one thing and mean something else and are sometimes more truthful when they actually are lying. What does the theme of double identity and dualistic language convey? What is true and what is false? Why all these paradoxes? Why lie? In this essay I will show that in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the notion of double identity and duality is connected to the language and the lying and reveals a society of double standards of morality and turn out to be a deconstruction of Victorian moral and social values. I will also argue that the duality, the double identities and the lying might be explained partly in a colonial context. Since Wilde was Irish and a covert homosexual, he represented a despised ‘other’. Through his studies, reading Classics at Oxford, Wilde was granted access to the privileged though. He could thereby be regarded as a part-time outsider. Peter Raby asserts in “Wilde’s comedies of Society” that Wilde used this position to portrait and expose English society, a society that still ruled a large part of the world, and that he imitated Englishness as “a subtle form of insult” (Raby 158).

The notion of double identity was a well-established theme during the Late Victorian era, a theme Wilde shared with many of his fellow writers. In Robert Louis Stevenson's best-selling horror novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), "a work which Wilde knew and admired" (Mighall xiii), there is a preoccupation with the idea of a double life and the divided self, a respectable public identity and an amoral self. Dr Jekyll creates a potion that can transform him into the dreadful Mr Hyde. This 'twin' as he terms Hyde, provides him with an alibi and gives him "release from the constraints of social conformity, and [allows] Jekyll himself to still walk the path of righteousness" (Mighall xiii). In "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case" at the end of the novella, when it is revealed that two people are actually one, Jekyll claims to be "committed to a profound duplicity of life" and explains "man's dual nature [...] that man is not truly one, but truly two [...] because all human beings, as we meet them, are commingled out of good and evil" (Norton 1709-1711).

Another narrative where dualism, split personality, is treated is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes (the first published in 1887), where the two male characters have a complementary relationship. Sherlock Holmes is the brilliant detective with dark secrets and Dr. Watson is his faithful side-kick and chronicler. Conan Doyle spoke about Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as a novel on a high moral plane (Ackroyd 224), and morality was indeed something crucial to Victorian society. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is full of images of duality and a 'double life'. The main character, a selfish young man in pursuit of pleasures, offers his soul in return for perpetual youth but while he remains young and handsome his portrait becomes more and more horrid and reflects his corrupted soul. At the time it was written Wilde himself had "been indulging in in activities that were illegal and vilified by 'respectable' society, and which therefore forced him to live a double life" (Mighall xi). In the novel Dorian tells his friend Basil "My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite" whereupon Basil answers "England is bad enough I know, and English society is all wrong" (Wilde 145). Hence, in his novel Wilde mocked the pretensions and the social moralities of the English; "Wilde, an Irishman, was putting a mirror up to his oppressors" (Ackroyd 227). Even though *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a light-spirited comedy my aim is to show that in the play this Late Victorian, *fin-de-siècle*,

dualistic theme is the same as in the works mentioned above and in particular the notions of double identity and complementary character.

The method I have used as a starting point has been a close reading of the text and an analysis of the characters and the language. I have used historical and biographical criticism as a framework to the analysis. Even though biographical criticism is not to be regarded entirely solid, I have provided facts about the author as well as cultural context in the introduction since I believe these facts suggest meanings to the play. Further in the essay I have tried to link my ideas to Wilde's life as well as to the intellectual movement of the time. Wilde has been a key-figure to queer studies, but his versatility has also rendered him a position in political criticism – being a socialist, gender criticism – deconstructing gender roles and postcolonial criticism – being an Irish writer. These different standpoints overlap but I have looked upon the postcolonial aspect as one context in which the doubling is borne out. Imperialistic rhetoric deploys binary oppositions: good and bad, conqueror and subject or self and other (Cave 223). According to Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory*, postcolonial critics use three major concepts, first the notion of otherness, second a concern with the language and third emphasis on identity as doubled or fluid (Barry 187-8). I have thus in part structured the essay round these characteristics. The notion of otherness is implied in Wilde's position as an Irishman and homosexual. Otherness is linked to double identity examined in a chapter called "Characters and Connotation" and the concern with the language and how it is used is explored in a chapter called "Language and Lying".

I have used a number of secondary sources for commentary on the play and of particular importance have been the all-embracing *"The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde"* edited by Peter Raby, which includes among others "Wilde's fiction(s)" by Jerusha McCormack and "Oscar Wilde: the resurgence of lying" by Declan Kiberd, discussing the Irish question and the language and lying. Peter Raby's "Wilde's comedies of society" and "The Origins of The Importance of Being Earnest" have explored the characters and the origins of their names. Jeremy Lalonde's "A 'Revolutionary Outrage': The Importance of Being Earnest as Social Criticism" and Geoffrey Stone's "Serious Bunburism: The logic of The Importance of Being Earnest" has discussed issues like language, dandies, morality and deconstruction.

2. Characters and Connotations

In this chapter I will explore the characters in the play. First, I will investigate whether the names reveal anything about the characters and whether the characters have double identities or aliases. Then, I will examine the dualistic themes of doubling and complementary character.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is an obsession with names, and especially with the name of Ernest. Griffith states in *Writing Essays about Literature* that playwrights usually keep their characters simple enough for the audience to understand during the course of a performance and therefore often use stock characters and give them names to indicate their traits (Griffith 93). Investigating the characters' names and their possible connotations can therefore add to the understanding of the characters and their identity. To name something is to give it an identity, which is particularly interesting in a play so utterly concerned with identity. Moreover many of the characters lead double lives or at least have a secret past, i.e. a double identity.

John Worthing, called Jack, is the protagonist of the play. Jack has a country estate in Hertfordshire where he is the Justice of Peace. He is a serious, responsible guardian to his adoptive father's granddaughter Cecily and he stands for all the Victorian values of morality: duty, honour and respectability; "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" (Wilde 301). However, he pretends to have an irresponsible brother, named Ernest, who lives a scandalous life and always gets into trouble, which requires Jack to rush off to London to his assistance; "In order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes" (301). Thereby, Jack can disappear for days and do as he likes. In London, Jack goes under the name of Ernest; "My name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country" (300), and can live the life he pretends to disapprove of. He thus uses Ernest, his alter-ego, both as an excuse and a disguise to keep his honourable image intact. Jack does, in fact, not know his real name and who he is for as a baby he was found in a hand-bag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station. Wilde used to incorporate place-names, as well as other material at hand, into his comedies, and the name of Worthing was borrowed from a seaside resort in Sussex where Wilde had spent a holiday while he worked on

the play (Raby 143). Worthing had the serious properties apposite to a guardian and a Justice of Peace and the name of John/Jack is traditionally and plain enough as we are to understand from Gwendolen: “there is very little music in the name of Jack... It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations... And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John” (307). John Worthing is accordingly a solid, respectable name, suitable to the protagonist’s position and identity as a Justice of peace, a guardian and a pillar of society. However, his name and identity are not exciting and therefore restrictive. Hence, his invention of Ernest gives him new possibilities.

The name Ernest had previously appeared in one of Wilde’s comedies of society, *A Woman of No Importance*, in which Mrs Allonby mocks her absent husband Ernest. Russell Jackson admits in his essay “The Importance of Being Earnest” that ‘earnest’ in some circles was a code-word for homosexuals, but claims that it first and foremost had connotations of ‘probity’ and ‘high-mindedness’ and that “The claims that Wilde was writing out his Irishness in the double selves of his protagonists are more convincing than the argument for *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a specifically gay play” (Jackson 173). In *The Importance of being Earnest*, the characters are more occupied with the name Ernest than the fact of actually being earnest. Marrying a man called Ernest can be a goal in life; Gwendolen exclaims: “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” (306), and Cecily is of the same opinion “it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest... There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest” (332). At the end of the play Jack has to reconcile his two names and identities and then he finally understands who he really is.

Algernon Moncrieff, Algy, is the other main principal character of the play and he invents an imaginary friend to conceal his double life as well as borrow Jack’s alias Ernest to impose on Cecily. Algernon Moncrieff’s name is Scottish and aristocratic in sound; “It is not at all a bad name. In fact, it is an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get in to bankruptcy Court is called Algernon” (332). He is the charming, idle, selfish, witty dandy of the play, Wilde’s alter-ego, just as Lord

Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* and Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the latter two are evil and the two former are good, Algy has no moral convictions other than to live beautifully. To be able to escape dull social obligations: "in order that I can go down into the country whenever I choose" (301), he has invented an imaginary invalid friend called Bunbury who lives in the country and constantly summons Algy to his deathbed. In that way Algy can indulge himself while suggesting seriousness and duty. Further in the play he impersonates Jack's invented brother, Ernest, to approach Cecily. Consequently, in spite of his high position in the aristocracy, Algy employs Bunbury as an alibi and Ernest as a double character in order to escape society and improve his prospects.

Another example of dualism in the characters' behaviours is found in Lady Bracknell, Algy's aunt and Gwendolen's mother, who sets herself up as guardian of the morality of the society and implying that she is the only reliable source of taste and probity. She is found to be a parvenu, a social climber, and not an aristocrat at all; "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way" (349). Lady Bracknell's name is derived from a place in Berkshire where Lord Alfred Douglas's mother had a summer home, which Wilde had visited.

The two young ladies of the play, Gwendolen and Cecily, represent the city and the country and both of them have secret lives. The names of the two young ladies are differentiated in a way that: "Gwendolen Fairfax carries a certain weight and crisp urbanity, appropriate for Lady Bracknell's daughter", whereas the name "Cecily Cardew, has a musical lightness about it" (Raby 145). Gwendolen, the sophisticated city lady, leads a 'double life' in the sense that she pretends to go to a lecture but instead runs away to Ernest in the country. Cecily Cardew, Jack's ward, is a natural girl, almost a child of nature and she is just as imaginative, enthusiastic and as capable as Jack and Algy to invent a fantasy life. She lives a 'double life' in her diary where she invents a romance and even an engagement to Jack's wicked brother, Ernest. The diary becomes her fantasy world; "I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life" (318). She even buys herself a ring and writes letters from him, "The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little" (331).

Cecily's governess, Miss Prism, in comparison, has two very different sides: one rigid and prude puritan side where she highly approves of respectability; "As a man sows, so shall he reap" (323), and harshly criticizes people who live for pleasure only, and one more soft romantic side where she talks about having written a novel. What is more, she has romantic feelings for Chasuble, the vicar. Her dark secret is that she confused a baby and a manuscript twenty-eight years ago and placed the baby by mistake in her handbag, which she deposited at Victoria Station. Chasuble, ever so fond of metaphors, calls Miss Prism 'Egeria', which is the name of the Roman nymph who taught the Roman king judicial responsibility and self-discipline and her name is as a consequence an epithet for a woman who provides guidance. Yet Miss Prism's real name is Laetitia, which means 'joy' and 'delight' and shows that she has two sides, the moralistic guiding governess and the softer romantic self.

In contrast, Canon Chasuble D.D. is aptly and properly named after the ecclesiastical canon and a liturgical vestment; a chasuble is an ornament garment worn by priests. D.D. stands for Doctor of Divinity and he is constantly carrying out christenings; it is as Miss Prism says: "one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish" (324). Even Jack and Algy request christenings, and Chasuble can thereby be seen as highly connected to the notion of giving a name. To give a name is to give a definition. There is thus a theme of christenings in the play and when Jack and Algy ask to be christened it is as if they want to go back to childhood and change their identity. To change one's name and identity is an important concern from a postcolonial point-of-view where one can be almost doomed by a name since a name might reveal your nationality or your otherness: To change one's name and to gain a new identity is a device to fit in better and to get better prospects. Jack is not allowed to get married when he is Jack Worthing. However, his new identity in the end as Ernest Moncrieff gives him better prospects; a name is therefore of great importance.

Raby argues that Wilde used names in his plays as an act of revenge. In 1894 he was in a dispute with his publishers, Lane and Matthews, so he used their names as the manservant and butler in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He relented in the case of Matthews, though, and changed it to Merriman (Raby 145). In the play, even the seemingly unimpeachable Lane turns out to have led a double life when he lets slip that he has been married: "I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young lady" (296). It is, in

short, not only the upper-class that is forced to lead a double life; the entire society seems to be constrained to the same device.

Beyond that, Wilde originally wrote a four-act version of the play but it was later to be reduced to three acts and one scene that Wilde himself thought to be one of the funniest was “The excised scene, involving Gribsby”. In that scene ‘Parker and Gribsby, Solicitors’ are announced but only one gentleman is in the hall. He later explains “I am both, sir. Gribsby when I am on unpleasant business, Parker on occasions of a less severe kind” (Wilde 432). In the three-act version, however, the name of Miss Cardew’s solicitors is Markby, Markby and Markby. The name Markby is borrowed from an old-established firm of London solicitors connected to Wilde’s friend Robert Baldwin Ross, to whom *The Importance of being Earnest* was dedicated. Wilde tried to create a particular resonance in the selections of names and “Markby conveys an air of respectability, indeed gentility, far removed from the less salubrious solicitors of the four-act version, Gribsby and Parker, in which ‘Gribsby’ has the ring of a particularly ruthless, Dickensian kind of lawyer” (Raby 144). Merlin Holland, Wilde’s grandson writes in “Biography and the art of lying” that Wilde had an “almost childlike pleasure in the grandeur of historic names: ‘Surely everyone prefers Norfolk, Hamilton and Buckingham to Smith or Jones or Robinson’” (Holland 9), Wilde is supposed to have said. According to Holland this proves Wilde’s fascination with the aristocracy. In brief, the characters’ names are carefully chosen to give the right connotations, and the importance of names is emphasized as a theme in the play. Different names give different possibilities; names can be restrictive but also beneficial, depending on the situation. Since names are connected to identity, a new name can lead to an identity with new possibilities and better prospects. In addition, there are other ways to escape restrictions: by leading a double life or inventing a double identity, i.e. a complement to their selves.

As shown in this chapter, the theme of dualism and complementary character is evident in the play. There are two male principles, Jack and Algy. They argue most of the time, very often about food, and accuse each other of trivial things just like siblings would do and in the end they in fact turn out to be brothers, i.e. complementary, and Jack can exclaim: “Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother” (356). Furthermore, there are two young ladies, Gwendolen and Cecily, who are even more complementary characters since they represent two sides of England. Gwendolen represents the fashionable city and

Cecily the natural countryside; both of them reconcile and become sisters, sisters-in-law, but not until “they have called each other a lot of other things first” (314), as Algy so accurately predicted in the first act. These two brothers and two sisters make two couples. Jack escaped to the city and pretended to be Ernest and found his bride and Algy escaped to the country, pretended, just like his brother, to be Ernest and found his bride. Chasuble and Prism also ends up being a couple, reconciling church and education and Lane and Merriman, the perfect butlers add perfectly to the symmetry of the doublings. The only one who is on her own is Lady Bracknell, representing Victorian values and society, “insisting that she is the pinnacle of convention, good form and normality and that others must in consequence behave according to her dictate” (Mighall 430). She tells everyone what to do and stands, as suggested in the stage directions of the first production, in the middle of the stage at the end of the play with the couples grouped symmetrically around her (Cave 429).

The evidence so far suggests that Wilde was, just as the title of the play implies, highly aware of how important a name could be. Each name has a certain ring to it, including connotations, and is a starting-point to one’s position in life. In Victorian society a name could be an advantage point or a doom. Victorian morality was based on, and presumably even inseparable from, colonial and imperialistic morality, i.e. heavily self-righteous. The assumption was that the ruling class are ruling just because they are superior and implicitly good and the others are ruled over because they are inferior and accordingly bad. From our point of view it was a very oppressive morality, which contained a moral control of human behaviour. Hence, to escape the repressive morality, all the characters are compelled to lead a double life or invent a double character. The duplicity of the characters, their fluid identities, becomes a satire over Victorian behaviour as well as a more truthful description of what a human being is. The duality is enhanced by the complementary characters and the doublings but duplicity is also manifested in other aspects of the work, foremost in the language and in the lying.

3. Language and Lying

Wilde used double identity as well as a dualistic theme in the play, revealed in the language and in the strategies of lying, to exploit the hypocrisy of the society. Employing a double identity might be seen as lying, and in this chapter I will investigate how the dualistic theme is revealed through the language, the dialogue and the farcical tone, but first and foremost, in the lying.

Wilde, the wordsmith, had a way with words and used both wit and wordplay; *The Importance of Being Earnest* is described by W. H. Auden as “‘the purest example in English literature’ of a ‘verbal opera’” (Cave viii). For example, the name *E(a)rnest* and its obvious pun gives an absurd double meaning to both the name and the word. Another pun is on the *agricultural depression*, which Cecily describes as “‘the condition of aristocrats who find themselves depressed by country life’” (337). The name of Bunbury can lead to a new verb, ‘bunburying’ or to an epithet ‘bunburist’; “‘now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying’” (302) as Algy says. When Lady Bracknell hears that the fictitious Bunbury is dead, that he ‘quite exploded’, there is “‘a linguistic play on the double sense of ‘exploded’” (Lalonde 672): Algy uses the word figuratively but Lady Bracknell interprets it literally. Wilde was also fond of using the rhetorical device of inversions for comic effect, i.e. when a character starts to use an expression in one way but ends it in another unexpected way, for example, when Algy says: “‘I have a business appointment that I am anxious...to miss’” (321).

There is also a frequent use of epigrams, paradoxical expressions, which are the typical emblem of the modern dandy. Epigrams can be seen as dualistic since they contain both truths and lies. All the characters, Merriman excepted, “‘exploit epigrammatic wit and paradox’” (Lalonde 665). The epigrams, which are one of Wilde’s trademarks, “‘are centrally concerned with revising moral standards’” (Mackie 156) and they are both declarative and didactic in tone and have a contrasting structure, for instance, placing truth and lies in opposition to one another. When the characters lie, they on occasion do so in pentameter and indeed alliteration, such as Algy’s remark about a widow who is now said to live entirely for pleasure, “‘I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief’” (304), a line recycled from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a practice often repeated by Wilde.

Furthermore, there are many conflicts, verbal fights, double interests, between the characters. The conflicts are enhanced by the dualistic structure, the doubling of scenes and the repeating of dialogue, even talking in unison. The play opens with a verbal conflict between Algy and Lane. It is a conflict of class between master and servant; the upper and lower orders; of dominators and dominated. Algy, polite and civil, fights verbally with Lane about Lane listening to Algy's playing and Lane's stealing champagne, but he loses every exchange (Stone 32). "Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?" "I didn't think it was polite to listen, sir." "Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information." "I attribute it to the superiority of the wine, sir." (295).

The play then moves to conflicts within one social class. In the relationship between Jack and Algy, Algy is the clear dominator. He makes most of the jokes and forces Jack to tell the truth about his double life (Stone 33). The conflict is indeed very often about food, a general feature of Victorian farce. The characters are both eating and arranging to dine, or emphasizing the moral importance of being serious about meals; "I hate people who are not serious about meals" (303). Furthermore, the food is "always used as a weapon of domination" (Stone 38) in the play, just like the champagne mentioned above. In the first act Algy denies Jack any sandwiches since they are intended for Lady Bracknell, but that does not stop Algy from eating them all himself since she is his aunt. At the end of act two, Jack morally reproaches Algy for eating muffins: "I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances", but he is defeated by Algy: "At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins" (341), and Algy moreover denies him any of the muffins. Arguing over muffins may seem trivial but here it comes to symbolize Algy's advantage on the social ladder.

As with Algy and Jack, Gwendolen and Cecily's conflict is not only between 'town' and 'country.' It also deals with class and is fought partly through talking about food; "No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more...Cake is rarely seen in the best houses nowadays" (337). Their tea-party conflict has a neat structure. They both refer to the engagement in their respective diaries. Cecily's diary is earlier described as "a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication" (329) while Gwendolen refers to her diary in a more superior way; "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train" (336). Cecily states that the engagement

shall be announced shortly; “Our little country newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week”; Gwendolen counters that “the announcement will appear in the *Morning Post* on Saturday” (335). The *Morning Post* is superior in terms of class and sophistication over Cecily’s ‘little country newspaper’ and Gwendolen’s ‘Saturday’ is more precise than Cecily’s ‘next week’ (Stone 34). The argument ends with yet another class-reference when Cecily says, “This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade” and Gwendolen answers “I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different” (336). When Gwendolen and Cecily have fought the battle over ‘Ernest’ and Jack and Algernon are exposed, the language becomes increasingly patterned and artificial “as the dialogue for each couple exactly mirrors the responses of the other pair to the point where both men and women begin to speak in unison” (Cave xviii). On the whole, the conflicts follow a neat dualistic pattern and the weapons used are words and/or food. Remarks about food can be seen as a symbol of class-bound superiority and withholding food as a counterattack.

Lady Bracknell is in conflict with Jack and gives many examples of verbal description or distortions of reality. She talks about Jack’s smoking as an ‘occupation’ and that “A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are too many idle men in London as it is” (308). She approves of something she calls a ‘natural ignorance’ and disapproves of education; “education is radically unsound” (309). When Jack states that he has lost both his parents, she talks about them as things: “Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose *both* looks like carelessness” (310) and her “refusal to allow Gwendolen to ‘marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel’ is a perfect formulation of the upper order’s habit of treating people like things” (Stone 36). When she describes Jack as being “born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag” (311), an utterance derived from the phrase ‘born and bred,’ she is modifying reality verbally to suit the language. In act three she argues with Jack about Cecily and Algernon getting married, approving of Cecily only when she finds out about her fortune; “Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her... There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew’s profile” (349), and reckons Algernon to be an utterly eligible man and suitable husband, despite his debts since “He has nothing but he looks everything” (350). Hence, she changes and dictates reality verbally.

My thesis is that Wilde used the concepts of double identity as well as a dualistic theme in the play, revealed in the language and in the lying, in order to exploit the hypocrisy of the society, i.e. the ruling class, and in doing so he deconstructed Englishness. There is a deconstruction of gender roles, the church, the family, the education and the legal system in the play and these are exposed through the characters and their lying. All the main characters in the play, both men and women, are in a sense dandies, since they have all “the mannerisms of the dandy – idleness, effeminacy [and] immorality” (Lalonde 664). Instead of a traditional patriarch, Lady Bracknell rules with authority and the other women are almost as assertive. Lord Bracknell, on the other hand, is described as someone extraneous and replaceable and is used to dine upstairs if necessary when Lady Bracknell is having her dinner parties. Gwendolen refers to him as “painfully effeminate” but that it is something that “makes men so very attractive” (334). Dr Chasuble, representing the church, has one sermon which “can be adapted to almost any occasion” (324). But Jack and Algy’s baptisms have lost their meaning as a religious rite in the play and are reduced to an act of changing one’s name. The institution of marriage and family life is mocked foremost by Algy: “If I get married, I’ll certainly try to forget the fact” (297), but yet they all strive to become married. If one defies the rules of family life it might lead to socialism as Lady Bracknell believes: “To be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that remind one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?” (311). Lady Bracknell again has the strongest opinions about the educational system: “education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes” (309) and Gwendolen further explains Lady Bracknell’s opinions: “mamma, whose views of education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted” (334). Jeremy Lalonde claims in “A ‘Revolutional Outrage’: The Importance of Being Earnest as Social Criticism” that these observations are true from a Marxist outlook since “educational institutions serve the interests of the ruling class” (Lalonde 670). First and foremost it is the legal system that is deconstructed: Jack is a justice of peace, representing the judiciary system, and as a justice of peace he should speak nothing but the truth but in maintaining his identity as Ernest he is depicted as a liar and a lawbreaker. Wilde depicts a society

with manners and morals used as a façade, a society where people try to conceal their secret lives with the use of language itself as a mask (Cave 224).

Despite the fact that all the characters have secret lives and constantly lie, they all claim to be speakers of truth. Almost all the characters are “Truth-speakers,” often brutally so. The characters not only state truths conveying their morality, they also emphasize truthfulness, which runs as a theme through the play. Algy is the first to claim to be a speaker of truth when accused of talking nonsense in act one: “It isn’t [nonsense]. It is a great truth” (298). He also accuses Jack of untruthfulness, when he thinks Jack speaks like a dentist, which is vulgar “when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression” (300). Jack tells Algy “candidly” that he does not live in Shropshire and after telling him about his double identities states: “That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple” (301), a statement Algy punctuates with an epigram: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple” (301). Jack insists on being truthful when talking to Gwendolen: “...darling, to speak quite candidly...” (306) and so is Gwendolen: “...to tell you quite frankly...” (307). However, when Algy asks if Jack told Gwendolen the truth about his double identities, Jack answers “[*in a very patronising manner*]: ... the truth isn’t the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman” (313). In act two, Cecily hopes that Algy-as-Ernest has “not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time” since “That would be hypocrisy” (320) and when he later declares her to be the “personification of absolute perfection” she thinks that his “frankness” does him credit (329). The maintaining of truthfulness increases during the tea party scene. Gwendolen asks if she may “speak candidly,” which Cecily encourages since “whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid,” and Gwendolen asserts that she will “speak with perfect candour” (334). Later during their argument, Gwendolen is of the opinion that it is not only “a moral duty to speak one’s mind” but a pleasure and Cecily agrees that they should not wear “the shallow mask of manners” but “call a spade a spade” (336). Jack admits when ‘Ernest’ “is exploded” that it is very painful for him “to be forced to speak the truth” and that it is the first time in his life that he has “been reduced to such a painful position” and is “really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind” but he nevertheless tells them “quite frankly” that he has no brother Ernest (339). In the third act, Gwendolen and Cecily choose to accept Jack and Algy’s explanations, not because they believe them

but because of the “beauty” of the answers and the “credulity” of their voices. Gwendolen says: “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing” (345). Lady Bracknell does not emphasize her own truthfulness. It is implied in everything she says. However, she claims to “speak frankly” when engagements are discussed at the end of the play and she becomes somewhat upset when Algvy is accused of being untruthful: “Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian” (350). Jack completes the theme of truthfulness after he has found out that his real name is Ernest after all: “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?” (357). In conclusion, the theme of truthfulness illuminates the contrasted concept of lying; the characters often lie when they claim to speak the truth, but they also call attention to the fact that style and credulity is more important than actually speaking the truth. In the end of the play, the lies are revealed as the truths, which suggest a complementary relation between the two concepts.

Wilde grew up in a British colony, a colony where the peasants were forced to mirror their masters when they spoke. Wilde had witnessed this and had therefore learned how to ‘speak double’: he employed wit and irony as a counter-speech; he “turned the double-speak of the Empire back on itself” (McCormack 98). In “Oscar Wilde: the resurgence of lying,” Declan Kiberd argues that lying is a central element in Wilde’s plays and that the Irish Question might have caused lying itself to be considered a moralistic activity. In an oppressed country, “lying to government officials had long been seen as a genuinely alternative morality” (Kiberd 278). Words could be seen as weapons and irony, ambiguity and deceit as modes of self-protection. There are two sides to every story and there was a contrast between British pretence of ruling and reality, that they did not rule, that “gave rise to that bifocal vision to be found in most of the Anglo-Irish writers” (Kiberd 279). All the laws could be considered lies since they were invented by the British and only represented ideal aspiration than actual practice. Wilde also lived in an age when philosophers were coming to the conclusion that language itself was “a dubious, slippery commodity and that to talk is to learn how to tell lies” (Kiberd 276). Fluency and eloquence were distrusted and hesitation and inarticulacy admired and regarded as honesty. An Irish person often used English with a hesitation, ‘a charming tilt.’ Certain words and phrases could have one meaning in Ireland and another in England and the result could be that they were saying something they never intended. Yet

Yeats reported Wilde himself talking in perfect sentences (Norton 1720). In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Jack says: “Algy, you never talk anything but nonsense”, and Algy answers: “Nobody ever does” (316). But in the play the truths eventually conforms to the lies: Jack is Ernest and he has a brother, and Cecily becomes engaged just as she fabricated in her diary; she lies herself into an engagement.

Wilde asserted in his essay “The Decay of Lying” that there were many different kinds of lies – white lies, black lies, lies that are told to save face or to gain advantage – but the highest form of lying was lying for its own sake; lying as art. In another essay “The Artist as Critic”, Wilde talks about the telling of beautiful untrue things and suggests that realism only is a lower form of truth. The lie can acquire “its own reality, and may indeed turn out to have been true all along in the world of art” (Kiberd 287). The conclusion is that the opposite of truth can also be true, like in the case of Jack, who really is both Jack and Ernest. Furthermore, if lies are a higher truth, truths might be lower lies. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, everybody commits a lie or falsehood at some point which seems to reveal a society unable to function without them. Wilde creates a world of opposites and doubles where the self and the *doppelgänger* could be seen as creating a whole person and where truths and lies could create a higher truth.

In short, the duplicity in the language consists of wordplay with double meanings and epigrams with double meanings. The duplicity is also revealed in the double characters and in the conflicts, which include double interests. Above all, embedded in wit and double language, the play consists of lying. The lying is enhanced and illuminated by the contrasted theme of truth-speaking and is employed to deconstruct sociocultural issues like gender, church, education, family and legal system. The double identities and the double language of the play are related to the lying since Wilde seems to suggest that lying is double and that the duplicity of lying is a useful as well as moralistic tool to reveal the truth of a repressive Imperialistic society. In order to fully understand the wit in Wilde’s play, manifested in the language and lying, we might in part assume a colonial perspective where the comic rhetoric could be seen as an effect of Wilde’s colonial position and of speaking double.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the established Late Victorian dualistic theme in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. First I investigated the characters and their names in “Characters and Connotations,” where I showed that their identities were double and that this was a function of escaping a repressive society. Then, in “Language and Lying,” I investigated lying, manifested in witty wordplay and paradoxical epigrams. Furthermore, I demonstrated that the play as a whole, its structure and doubling, enhances the dualistic theme. It became obvious that some of the characters were leading a double life and that they were lying about it. They claimed to be speakers of truth and they used assertive language to conceal their lies. The frequent use of lies and language with double meanings in the play suggests that there is duplicity in lying and that the truth has two sides, just like the characters in the play are dual and have two sides.

Besides, I have tried to find out whether Wilde might have had a more serious intent by employing themes of double character, double language and lying. I have looked upon Wilde as an Irishman who wanted to be an Englishman, fascinated by the ruling aristocracy. His position must have been ambivalent, though, knowing that despite his genius he could never fully be accepted, being both Irish and homosexual. He was an inferior, exotic ‘Other,’ almost the same but not quite. However, this position, as partly an insider partly and outsider, gave him the possibility, and perhaps the motivation, to scrutinize the ruling class. Through his works, his “modest proposals,” Wilde could write back to the Empire and direct subtle critique to the ruling class. In consequence he did so by employing devices like theatrical dandyism to get the attention and witty language to keep it. Moreover, he produced this critique in the theatres in London, at the heart of society and at the heart of the British Empire.

All in all, the play unmasks the society and says something about reality: that appearance can be deceptive and that duplicity is an essential part of reality. The notion of the double or divided identity suggests that no one is one thing and might even lead to an acknowledgement, that diversity is not only essential but something positive. This conclusion is based on the outcome of the play where everyone, even though they lead double lives and lie, get what they want in the end. To be dual, or more than one, or ‘other’ could, in contrast to the Victorian notion, actually be seen

as something potential and beneficial. The Victorian view on what was true and what was real, was far too limited for Wilde, both as an artist and a person. Reality, morality and identity are complex and versatile, as we are to understand from his works and his own life. Truth and lie might sometimes even go hand in hand to be fully true just as a person might be both good and bad to be whole and complete. From a postcolonial point-of-view plurality can be seen as the source of energy and potential change. I like to think that the dualism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* celebrates diversity and difference, that first appearance, nationality, gender, sexuality or other labels are not more than starting-points.

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