



## A Marxist Analysis of Ideology and False Consciousness in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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### Abstract

This paper examines *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899) through a Marxist perspective of Oscar Wilde showing how Wilde critiques Victorian middle class values and exposes the persistence of class division. Wilde uses irony, inversion, and humour to challenge rigid class divisions, the economic nature of marriage, and focuses on appearances over relationships. Using the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), the study argues that although Jack and Algernon try to challenge social expectations through their shifting, they are deeply shaped by the institutions that shape them. The comic ending does not disrupt the social order but instead highlights how class ideology continues to endure. In the end, Wilde's work offers a critique that reveals how individuals are shaped by systems of power and hierarchy and struggles that still appear today.

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### Introduction

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899) is one of the most well-known comedies in English literature, offering a rigid satire of Victorian society. The play presents moral hypocrisy and strict social conventions through wit and humour. Wilde examines the nature of constructed identity, the hollowness of social ideals and the value that society places on a person's appearance and reputation. By the end of the play, we have witnessed irony and absurdity revealing ways public morality contradicts private behaviour, demonstrating that Victorian values weren't all they were cracked up to be. While historically specific, the play explores themes that feel pertinent today and demonstrates how social expectations still dictate individual behaviour. In this way, Wilde has invited us to look closer at the social systems that dictate identity and self-presentation.

A typical Marxist interpretation of the play would involve exposing how each part serves the whole using a dialectical examination of how elements are served within Victorian society and its base-superstructure economic model. Looking at the play from this angle shows the way Wilde uses not to reveal his intentions and ideas directly, but to have them exposed by his characters. What emerges is a sense that people sometimes accept beliefs that hide a deep tension between social classes. These conflicts were not revealed openly, but hidden inside humorous and subtle actions. For example, the character of Lady Bracknell is obviously preoccupied with wealth, social rules and status, so through her, Wilde is showing how something as ordinary as family can support the structure that keeps these values active. Her solid attention to social status and manners also suggests how unequal social relations can seem refined and even respectable. The idea of "Bunburying" is adding more layers to this, in the way that it looks like a way to stay away from social pressure, yet it does not break away from it. Characters may be seen to adopt different identities, but they stick to the system that rules and controls them, so they remain tied to it.

In the end, the play shows how these beliefs and practices change society and maintain its class divisions. Wilde does not tackle this in a direct way, but he lets the use of irony and contradictions reveal the tension between people's social expectations and

their personal desires.

### Methodology

This article looks at how Wilde used dialogue and dramatic techniques in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, pointing out that his choices are connected to the social pressures of late Victorian England. Characters like Lady Bracknell reveal the concerns of the upper class society, not only reflecting the social norms, especially the matters connected to money and fortune. So, when we read the play from a Marxist point of view, this will help us look at the play as more than a comedy. It also shows how class values are maintained and dealt with, and how identity was made to look like it was shaped by material concerns and social reputation.

Thus, this analysis is based on a Marxist approach to ideology, which tends to be classed at the level of the ruling classes. In Wilde's play, his characters seem molded by Victorian values as much as any British citizen at the time, especially those tied to marriage, wealth and social standing, all of which are essential to one's sense of identity. So, the play illustrates "false consciousness," or that no one fully understands their material conditions because they always fall victim to dominant capitalist ideologies and practices. This helps explain why such characters as Jack and Gwendolen seem to accept that personal worth is determined by social propriety.

Henceforth, the study uses Louis Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to analyze how the family helps to maintain the ruling class's ideology. Althusser does explicitly mention "the family ISA" as one of the private institutions that reproduces the relations of production alongside educational ISA, because in capitalist social formations "the School-Family couple replaces the Church-Family couple" (Althusser, 1971, p. 143–44). This is evidenced by Lady Bracknell's insistence that marriage ought to be a commercially beneficial contract tailored to the financial interests at hand.

### Discussion

In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, marriage does not constitute a romantic or personal pairing but rather an elevation above the social plane. The capitalist culture goes into the minds of men and women, then they want gold, prestige, and power. Lady Bracknell's character is most sharply drawn by the commodification of marriage, as she believes marriage is only a commercially advantageous contract that needs to suit social and financial interests. As H. E. B. Gossman has argued, Wilde "used the theater as a space to critique and question bourgeois values, particularly those regarding marriage and social identity." (Gossman, 2013, p. 74) Speaking in an overtly melodramatic manner, Lady Bracknell embodies such bourgeois values, dismissing Jack's genuine love for Gwendolen on practical and financial grounds. The most famous exchange between Lady Bracknell and Jack, "You can hardly imagine that Lord Bracknell and I would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?" (Wilde, 1895, p. 25). This quotation encapsulates the Victorian ideal whereby marriage was seen as nothing more than an economic contract rather than an emotional or personal bond, highlighting the capitalist commodification of relationships. Therefore, Lady Bracknell is viewed as a satire on the bourgeois attitude toward life, in which individuals are valued by how

successfully they can contribute to perpetuating class structures. Through satire against such a system, it sheds light on its absurdity: how personal decisions of individual people, in fact, matters of love, should be determined by economic and social considerations, rather than any real human connection.

Thus, in the play, Wilde satirically exposes the same petite-bourgeois institutions that Marx criticised as being central to capitalism for maintaining social hierarchies through ideology. As described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, 'The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production.' Therefore, the institution of marriage by Lady Bracknell illustrates how human relations are turned into commodities—that is, how the bourgeoisie sustains itself through commodification. Necessarily, Jack Worthing's character presents an alternative view of how deliberately the capitalistic class structure propagates consciousness or false consciousness. Jack's internal conflict concerning his birth and social standing directly challenges the capitalist notion that it is within everyone's capability to achieve a higher social position regardless of where they begin. Wilde satirises this new myth of meritocracy to show that, in reality, the Victorian social system never allowed mobility based on personal merits but rather on one's social and economic conditions. Henceforth, "Jack's predicament illustrates Gagnier's observation that Wilde's comedy 'exposes the contradiction between proclaimed meritocratic values and actual aristocratic privilege' in Victorian society (Gagnier, 1986, p. 45)." Moreover, Jack's struggle to secure his identity as an aristocrat perfectly fits the Marxist notion of false consciousness: he believes that by adopting the external trappings of the aristocracy, he will be able to overcome his working-class background. False consciousness is what Marxists have primarily located; meanwhile, their genuine interest lies somewhere else, and the working class is made to believe in an ideology. Jack tries to prove that he deserves a higher status by creating a fictional brother named Earnest, but is later unmasked as the nephew of Sir Thomas Cardew. This is indicative of how social systems often serve the interests of elites, even when they would seem to favor individual effort or merit.

Bourgeois marriage, at various strata of society, and particularly regarding entire social classes, serves to conserve or allow the building up of a certain amount of social capital which would align closely with Marxist theory. Economic manifestations: Marx states the bourgeoisie maintain their rule over the proletariat primarily through economic manifestations leveraging the role of their power as a pressure which is perpetuated by ideologies that justify and normalize their situation (Marx, 1867, p. 71). Lady Bracknell's strong desire to find a social advantageous marriage for her daughter does not appear to come from her willing for a personal preference. Instead, it is showing her understanding of the world that she belongs to, so she looks for something beyond personal relationships, something to secure her daughter's financial situation. We might see *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a direct critique of a society that considers marriage as a material and social transition. So, characters like Lady Bracknell and Algernon we might see them as exaggerated characters, but their behavior shows the tensions and inconsistencies within that social mindset.

Jack and Algernon both used fake identities to deal with the strict rules of society. Jack decided to create a fake brother

while Algernon created an imaginary friend called Bunbury, to raise their reputation and to go along in such a society. So by doing this, they expect to gain a respected status among the people, moving beyond the norms of money and birthright, so personal choices can also decide the place of the character in society. But even with doing this, they cannot stay out of the system that they are trying to be against, their lies do not change the system and the social order that was based on specific rules and behaviors. As McClure notes, "The spirit of revolt against the contemporary bourgeois spirit... characters become more authentic with their false identities" (McClure, 2024, p. 28). The fake identities do not really provide freedom from the social boundaries and will never last for long.

So when that all ends there will be nothing to remain and all of their efforts and disguises will look like a temporary illusion that they cannot abandon. In this respect, Wilde appears to suggest that bourgeois society depends not only on external control but also on forms of self deception. Jack's creation of "Earnest" enables him to get into a social space that would be close to him as his belief that by adapting this character, this will make him more accepted by Gwendolen, who points out that she will only marry a man called "Earnest" (Wilde, 1895, p. 34). Algernon, in much the same way creates Bunbury to be out of his obligations and imagines a life that seems controlled by social expectations. For a while he seems to believe this might actually enable him to be close to the higher class and get away from his own. In the end, these illusions do not hold up for long, as Wilde seems to suggest that class identity is not something that we can simply hide or change even with a convincing performance. Their lies unravel, and along with them any actual chance of escaping the system. So the play exposes just how stubbornly irrational these social structures often are.

As the play unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that both characters are stuck within their own attempts to flee the bourgeois system. Perhaps they have temporarily shed the obligations and restrictions of their social class, but they are byproducts of a system that cannot be dismantled this easily. Therefore, "The elaborate deceptions practiced by Jack and Algernon serve not to overthrow social hierarchy but to demonstrate how deeply embedded they are within its values. Their lies become a means of conforming to, rather than escaping from, the expectations of their class" (Powell, 1990, p. 78). The satire lies in the fact that, although they try every means of deception against the very system they are part of, Jack and Algernon end up being complicit with it against themselves. This provides Wilde's critique of bourgeois society, which hides such forces of yearning and social barriers that keep freedom from being achieved. The fake identities of Jack and Algernon, in part, show how far people in bourgeois society are prepared to go with respect to their power, essentially going to the lengths of creating false externalities that both encourage them and shape their identity. In the end, Wilde uses these characters in a way that shows how difficult it is to move beyond the class system. No matter how much they try to escape or reshape it, it is the thing that shapes their lives and their position in society. The attempts that they make to step away from the society seem problematic since they will be stuck between the idea of moving up in society or looking for their personal freedom. This shows Wilde's broader criticism of the capitalist society because social class is moving forward, shaping people's choices and their relationships within it.

### **The Limits of Social Mobility in *The Importance of Being Earnest***

In the play, it is clear that Wilde is criticizing the capitalist system especially when he portrays the character of Jack and his effort to move up in the society. He relies on the fact that he is the nephew of Sir Thomas Cardew which shows how fragile and uncertain this effort is to move up in his society. Jack's situation explains how difficult, or maybe impossible to the one to get a good reputation in the society through wealth only, yet he did not get what he wants only after he was named after Cardew. In this respect, we understand that classism looks flexible at first, but it does not mean that one can get the whole respect and admission from such a system, especially when Jack's reputation escalated after his true identity was revealed.

Jack's background is tied to him despite his lying about his true identity since it is tied to him strongly (Eltis, 1996, p. 158). All of his achievements of wealth, and his feelings for Gwendolen were not enough to make him detached from his origin, so his efforts are useless when it comes to change the fact of where he comes from. Social class, in short, tends to be whatever you were born into rather than what you achieve. Similarly, Jack's identity search exposes the limitation of success, arguing that society judged success via purity and virtue instead of wealth and inheritance; thus, while he includes characters' events such as this in his play, Wilde is challenging social mobility, suggesting social values remain closely bound with riches inevitably inherited. And as Jack's preposterous biography is revealed, it becomes clear that nothing, not his wealth and new patrician rank, can buy him real social acceptance. This is comic, with Wilde (1895) writing, "You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother." (p. 69). The fact that Jack suddenly moves from outsider to acceptable suitor exposes how arbitrary the concept of class is in determining eligibility for marriage. His suffering demonstrates that the only escape hatch for those in the working class under a capitalist system is age, even as they become proficient and accumulate hierarchically defined measures of success. Wilde is criticizing a system, or rather a society, that allows wealth and status to dictate class instead of moral character or virtue.

Gwendolen and Cecily represent capitalist meritocracy and egalitarian principles but show the hollowness of these ideologies through their actions. Gwendolen's obsession with Jack's name "Earnest" shows how bourgeois society values proper partners who conform to a specific criterion of wealth and status before others, such as human ones. According to Guy, "Gwendolen's romantic preferences reveal the extent to which personal relationships have been colonized by the logic of social consumption, where even love must conform to the demands of fashionable society" (Guy, 2004, p. 176). That preserves the illusions of equality within capitalist society. Gwendolen's interest in Jack is not one based on real love but rather his purported aristocratic status, which exposes the superficiality of mobility within capitalism. Cecily, in much the same way is drawn to Algernon not for who he really is, but for the image he presents to himself. She is highly attracted to the wealth and social status he reveals, so their relationship with Jack and Algernon shows how real class divisions are hidden behind the idea that everyone is equal. In the end, it is quite difficult to remove these class barriers that shape and control people's lives, as well as their social lives.

In addition, the play intertwines themes of ideology and false consciousness with characters who actively participate in preserving systems that impede their own emancipation. Wilde criticizes not only the oppressive capitalist structures but also how, like his characters, people so readily adopt such frameworks, becoming both victims and co-creators of their false consciousness. In sociology, this would be understood as false consciousness: a condition where people do not see the contradictions in their society, but are instead lulled into beliefs and values that perpetuate their subservience (Eyerman, 1981, p.44). *The Importance of Being Earnest* plays with this in varying degrees of the characters' awareness of their falsehoods. Jack's false belief in his legitimacy based on a fabricated past directly reflects the general ignorance among the bourgeoisie regarding the limitations and falseness of their ideology. Henceforth, "The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* come from various backgrounds, and it is possible to find common factors between them based on, for example, their financial situation and placement in social hierarchy. Thus, the set of characters in the play gives a rough idea of the different classes that existed in Victorian society" (Tamminen-Kivistö, 2005, p.4). Therefore, the fake identity Jack employs to gain acceptance symbolises the false consciousness pervasive within the bourgeoisie, who remain unaware of the arbitrary and hypocritical nature of their social systems. Meanwhile, Algernon exercises false consciousness with cynicism and wit. He has as much fun deceiving himself as he does in his Bunburying. Such a narrative allows him to leave the confines of society; however, it does not actually enable him to depart from the impositions of class power, as it also serves the desires of the subject through an alternative narrative. The capitalist system is reinforced when one is allowed, like Algernon, to benefit from one's social position without confronting its inherent contradictions by escaping the pressures of bourgeois society through "Bunburying." Akbar argues that Algernon sees Bunbury as a way to escape his social obligations. Akbar (2022, p.11) explains that Bunburyism allows people to avoid the usual social rules, which are often controlled by strict expectations. Algernon, as self-aware as Jack is naïve, this contrasting attitude to the class struggle defines two potential responses from within capitalist society: passive acceptance of the system as such, and an insistence on finding a route around its walls, but both remain caught therein. Algernon's humor reveals a deeper contradiction in bourgeois society, one where even supposedly rebellious acts are often sucked back into the system they fictively oppose. In this manner, the characters of Algernon and Jack, whom we assume are resisting social expectations to weave their own identities, only serve to reinforce the societal cage they were attempting to break out of. Wilde's critique becomes clearer here. The existence of the system and society is so strong that they are able to create rules that are strong enough to suppress even a technical split between bourgeois individuals from their class. Any such attempt towards freedom makes finding oneself more difficult, so the society that characters like Cecily, Joe, Algernon and Gwendolen live in will limit their seeking of achieving freedom.

### Satire and Subversion of Victorian Society

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde is criticizing the Victorian society, especially the bourgeois class that shapes marriage and relationships according to its

rules which are mostly connected to material and social status. By depicting humour and satire, Wilde presents these manifestations in his play to make clear how people's wills and choices are neglected. The use of satire is not only to provide entertainment, but also to criticize and question society in a humorous way. So there is a critique of outdated and often ridiculous social norms from within, targeting matters on which the aristocracy and bourgeoisie take a serious stance. One can notice how Wilde satirically depicts the character of Lady Bracknell whom we can consider her as an example of the bourgeois Victorian characters who prefer wealth and social status over all other respects. She states that "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness" (Wilde, 1895, p.32), her claim gives us a clear example of how silly and arbitrary characters like her can be. So, it is clear to notice how Victorian society gives a huge importance to social class and family ties rather than other moral aspects which shows how shallow the society is. Wilde's portrayal of Lady Bracknell's character and her actions which are normal in her society, but he (Wilde) shows us these actions mockingly and funnily.

The play uses reversal to show the hidden ideas that form the social expectations through the character of Lady Bracknell by depicting her character in a comic way. Through the use of this technique, Wilde draws a challenging atmosphere for the audience with the different expectations about social class. Also, he presents characters who are supposed to have strong morality and good social values, but their behaviors and actions look different. Through this reversal, the characters care about the social appearances more than what they pretend to be, having good morals and respectful principles. For example, the character pretends to defend the morals and ideals of the upper class, but she is acting like she wants to secure her life and shows more self interest. And by revealing these actions in such a way, Wilde is questioning the seriousness and reality of these social values and he suggests that they are less solid than what people want to show. Also, the time Jack discovers the truth that he is the rightful relative of Lady Bracknell, so he has the right position among the aristocratic family. With the idea of reversal, we can understand that the actions of the characters are shaped by the social rules which were not solid and respectful. As Raby (1995) states, "Wilde's comedy systematically dismantles the pretensions of Victorian society by revealing how social distinctions rest on nothing more substantial than arbitrary conventions and inherited prejudices" (p. 78). So what Wilde states is that he is challenging the assumption that any idea about family and class is normal and inseparable, but he suggests the idea that they are shaped by society, so they can change and be questioned.

By using reversal and satire, Wilde is doing two things at the same time; he uses entertainment and criticism to add more acceptable ideas to the audience. By portraying characters like Lady Bracknell in a way that can seem exaggerated he makes such characters who represent a wide range of society more acceptable to be criticized in a funny way. So, this means that many ideals of Victorian society are arbitrary and seem irrational as people may believe. As the play proceeds the social obstacles are vanishing and everything becomes almost random; we can figure out that all the distinctions are just appearances, not realities. In a similar way, the end of the play reveals the way Wilde uses reversal to question the

social ideals which shows how unusual class prejudices can be as they are unstable and arbitrary (Craft, 1990; Powell, 2013). Also, Wilde tries to point out the fact of how arrogant and showy Victorian society defines itself to be. Characters like Lady Bracknell are indeed so foolish and fooled by the social rules that she cannot define herself away from them. Eltis (2013) suggests that “Wilde's comedies operate through a systematic inversion of Victorian moral certainties, exposing the artificial nature of social conventions that his contemporary audiences took for granted” (p. 298). At the end, Wilde uses norms like humor and satire to criticize Victorian society and show the contradictions of its characters by adopting false ideologies to define themselves.

### **Bourgeois Morality and the Illusion of Respectability**

Wilde, through his play uses satire to question and criticize the values of the bourgeois society and reveal the huge gap between the social reality and its appearances. The society was built on norms like wealth, social status and hypocrisy in different matters and more importantly the marriage. A clear example of his expose of society is the use of the name “Earnest” which is connected to the respectability and the acceptance of a society that prioritizes the name over identity. An example of this is Gwendolen’s insistence on marrying such a character, which shows how they prefer appearances over love and correct relationships. As McClure (2024) points out, “Gwendolen is close to expressing her authentic love for Jack, but her love is reflected through the duplicity of Jack’s nature. He isn't Ernest at all (at least, not yet), but she earnestly loves him. And yet, even her authentic love is 'hidden' from real society, from the real facts of life” (p. 16). That obsession highlights how shallow the actual values are within an upper class where names, titles, and social standing hold far more importance than real human relationships ever can. The characters’ fixation on ‘Ernest’ is thus an explicit critique revealing such shallowness within bourgeois marriage and social conventions.

Therefore, the ending of the play in which Jack and Algernon ultimately learn who they are is a rejection of the consciousness that can be found within bourgeois society. Although Wilde deliberately defies expectations by allowing the reconciliation of love interests from different social backgrounds, it emphasises just how implausible a class-based ideology about society truly is. “By resolving the narrative through the breakdown of class distinctions and the revelation of hidden identities,” Tamminen-Kivistö (2005) observes, “While Jack uses deceit about his identity, he behaves as if he actually were an upper-class person... When it turns out that he was actually born an upper-class person, the worst thing is not that he is discovered to have been deceitful... Oscar Wilde has managed to turn the critique upside down” (p. 48, 90). It also emphasizes Wilde’s belief that social barriers based on class have to be fictitious rather than real barriers to happiness. Wilde subverts social norms to expose the contradictions in bourgeois morality. His characters, including Jack, Algernon and Lady Bracknell, are engaged in a system where appearance is valued over true worth. Wilde’s comedic sensibility makes this class malleability painfully clear, his characters’ bourgeois values giving way to deeper truths and natural desires. According to Bansal (2021), “Wilde's comedies expose the hypocrisy, the superficiality and deceptiveness of his society which appears concealed beneath a mask of respectability and nobility. His distinguished art reposes in his dramatic portrayals of

Victorian society, aimed at presenting as sharp a picture as he could convey of this fashionable, smug aristocratic world” (30-31). Wilde concludes by mocking how this class system, designed to prevent true love, always fails when it matters most, primarily when genuine love exists between people from different classes.

Through the comic and satirical elements, Wilde not only exposes the inherent contradictions within the bourgeois moral code but also mocks the Victorian class system. The revelation that highlights how meaningless the false consciousness governing the lives of these characters actually provides an excellent platform for critiquing society when it treats class distinctions as a natural order. In this context, he emphasises personal integrity and love as superior values compared to the superficial ones imposed on individuals by society.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is at once a scathing Marxist critique of Victorian bourgeois ideology and an unusually clear-eyed recognition of its continued hold. Through the portrayal of satire, reversal and comedy, Wilde wants to show that marriage was treated as a financial transaction and reputation polish rather than personal interest and love. Characters like Lady Bracknell represent the strict belief that status based on a family’s name and background is more important than any other respect. On the other hand we notice characters like Algernon and Jack who decided to invent new identities to gain respect and good status, but they also faced many obstacles in doing so.

As the play proceeds, we can notice that natural relationships and their manifestations of love and personal choices are not considered in the society, rather they prefer what the system imposes on them. We can notice this with Jack’s reaction when he found out that he belongs to an aristocratic family as his true origin. The play does not play any role in changing the class, but it shows that it is affecting people even in their choices even when things look to go straight. So, Wilde does not seem interested in showing the social changes and focuses more on stating how people stay limited to it, even when they seem to have a way out of it.

So, the play is still tackled because it is criticizing Victorian society, but does not reject it, which shows Wilde’s confused feelings about its values. Analyzing its implications on such themes reveals both the tensions between individual freedom and social structures based around class, in the Victorian period and its present-day counterpart.

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