

**A COMEDY OF INVERSION AND SUBVERSION:
THE CARNIVALESQUE IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST***

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The present paper endeavours to explore the deliberate reversal and subversion of the view of the world as embedded in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and to analyze how far it is 'carnavalesque' in nature. The play questions and ridicules almost everything that human beings take seriously: birth, death, baptism, burial, love, marriage, illegitimacy, and responsibility, yet in a comical and light-hearted manner. In fact, many of the carnivalesque features, that of questioning the established notions, subverting which is considered to be sacred, mingling of the high and low, fact and fancy are all foregrounded in the play, either overtly or covertly. As far as merry-making and entertainment is considered, it is the reader who is thoroughly entertained. My paper analyses the inverted, 'carnavalesque' side of the play and how Wilde exploits this aspect to condemn the hypocritical Victorian solemnity and the sham seriousness of contemporary society, even while entertaining that society.

Originally, 'carnival' was a feast observed by Roman Catholics before the Lenten Fast began. The word 'carnival' is derived from the Latin *carne(m) levare* which means 'to put away flesh'. Traditionally, meat was not permissible during the Lenten Fast. So before the fast, the Roman Catholics indulged in all kinds of revelry, merry-making, and entertainment. During the carnival, rules and regulations are temporarily suspended or reverted. It symbolizes disruption and subversion of authority; a turning upside down of the hierarchical scale. There are three aspects of 'carnival'—liminality, the suspension of norms and codes of behavior, and the ritual inversion of hierarchies. Carnival is actually a transitory event with an overt social purpose. It doesn't intend the overthrow the existing authority but to keep it as it is. It provides an outlet to the revolutionary ideas and discharges all kinds of ill-feelings accumulated for a long time. Thus 'carnival' acts a safety valve of those passions which might bring about a revolution or a coup. During carnival, the hierarchical societies become transient community of equals where the 'low' are given the license to criticize the superiors. The purpose is to regenerate the principles of classification and order on which the social structure and order exist. In Shakespeare, the high and the bourgeois cultures are placed side by side the carnivalesque culture. The characters like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Caliban in *The Tempest*, Feste and Sir Toby in *The Twelfth Night*, Fool in *King Lear* etc. represent the lineage of literary carnivalesque.

'Carnivalization' or 'Carnavalesque' is a term coined by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin who describes it as a literary mode that inverts and subverts the assumptions of the dominant style and atmosphere through humour and chaos. This concept was developed by Bakhtin in his study of seventeenth-century prose satirist François Rabelais in his book *Rabelais and His World*

(1941). ‘Carnival time’ is special to Bakhtin as it allows prevailing social hierarchies to be reversed. In the Introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin underpins:

The suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident in official feasts...it was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival

Bakhtin’s account of carnival is replete with aesthetic and political ‘possibilities’ and scholars working in diverse fields like literature, film, cultural studies “have turned to the concept to explain, and defend all manner of anarchic tendencies in their texts” (qtd. in Pearce 230).

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of popular culture. In the carnival, social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities and pieties and etiquettes, as well as all ready-made truths—are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Thus, fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell). Through the carnival and carnivalesque literature, a “world upside-down” is created, ideas and truths are endlessly tested and contested, and all demand equal dialogic status. The high culture is mingled with the profane, and the authoritative voice of hegemony is de-privileged by alternative voices within the carnivalized literary text. The earliest forms of carnivalesque literature include the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire. The Socratic dialogue is related to the “immediacy of oral dialogue, in which the discovery of truths conceived as an unfolding exchange of views rather than as an authoritative monologue.” In the Menippean satire, “the three planes of Heaven (Olympus), the Underworld, and Earth are treated to the logic of carnival”, that is, the dissolution of the “earthly inequalities” (Selden and Widdowson and Brooker 51). Wilde’s play is evidently in the dialogic form where truths are revealed due to the interactions among the characters.

The Importance of Being Earnest is not overtly ‘carnavalesque’ since it doesn’t outwardly foreground any revelry, merry-making or profanity. It is one mainly in the inversion that is embedded in the nature, viewpoint and, particularly, ideology of the characters. In fact, almost every sentence of almost every character is the reversal, inversion, and subversion of established notions in some way or the other. What the characters say, feel, or believe is exactly the opposite of what is generally said, felt, or believed. This inversion is evident throughout Wilde’s three-act play starting at the very beginning. In fact, the characters utter these inverted speeches with such ease and as-a-matter-of-fact-way that at times it feels like they belong to a world order completely different yet natural. Even though there is no overt celebration, the experience, while going through the play, is no less than one. The play doesn’t tire one out. Never for a moment does the journey get exhaustive and in fact, one can return to the text again and again and yet experience the same, joyous, celebratory, pleasant impression. But, while in case of the ‘carnavalesque’, the ‘topsy-turveydom’ is permitted “for a limited spell only, after which the social order is necessarily restored” (Pearce 231); in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “the inversion is permanent and pertaining to ideology rather than social structure” (Redfield 2).

The first degree of inversion that captures one’s attention is the inversion of speech. Algernon is one the characters who sets up the festive atmosphere by his multiple inverted aphorisms. His belief regarding the conduct of the higher and lower classes is the anti-thesis of

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what is widely accepted. The common notion that it is the upper classes which should set an example of ‘moral responsibility’ for the lower order is easily reversed by him as he observes:

Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (Wilde 2)

Algernon makes this observation in such a serious, contemplative manner that renders it more comical. He further categorizes the act of Jack’s ‘proposing’ Gwendolen under the category of ‘business’ rather than pleasure. Unlike others, Algernon loves to hear his ‘relations abused’ and considers them ‘tedious pack of people’. The play, throughout, is replete with other reversed ideas of Algernon. In spite of lying and committing gross hypocrisy, he declares: “My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree” (37). But Algernon, of all characters, is both the greatest proponent of the frivolity in the society he is inhabiting and the most aware of its triviality, as is evident in his exclamation, “And I don’t care twopence about social possibilities” (61).

Jack Worthing is another major character in the play who harbours no less inverted or reversed notions. Jack cites ‘pleasure’ as his reason for coming to town and goes on to comment: “When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country amuses other people” (2). He almost creates a division between the two worlds, one driven by pleasure, amusements, revelry, merry-making, entertainment, ‘carnival’ and another by business, seriousness and boredom. Jack apparently tries to be a serious, morally upright person but that doesn’t stop him from exclaiming that, “truth isn’t the sort of thing one tells a sweet, refined girl” (20) as it is not the appropriate way to behave with a lady. Later on, when he is actually forced to reveal the truth, he admits:

Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. (50)

Jack, even after emphasizing earlier that he neither has a brother nor does he intend to have one, later on reverses his own observation completely and cries out: “Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother!” (68). There is a considerable gap between the ‘Earnest’ of the title and the Ernest Gwendolen and Cecily fall in love with.

To add to the already comical and inverted world order, Wilde introduces Lady Bracknell, Algernon’s aunt who with her reversed, and distorted world view and paradoxical comments, dominates the play. She is obsessed with money in marriage and this is obvious from her interrogation of Jack. The question on Jack’s parents she calls ‘minor matters’ and on being informed of their demise, finds it ‘carelessness’ on their part. She is relentless and quite sincerely suggests Jack:

I would strongly advice you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over. (Wilde 18)

Her cross-examination of Cecily before she gives her consent to her marriage with her nephew Algernon is hilarious. At first she finds Cecily plain and unattractive. But when she learns of the fortune that Cecily’s grandfather has left in funds, she immediately changes her

tune. She is now prepared to wait till Cecily is thirty-five for her marriage to be consummated with Algernon who has “nothing but his debts to depend upon” (61). Lady Bracknell is never tired of uttering the opposite. She assesses Algernon as someone who is an “extremely...eligible young man”, who has “nothing but he looks everything” (62). According to her, people shouldn’t be given the opportunity of finding out each other’s characters before marriage. Lady Bracknell not only turns the social order upside down whenever she wishes, but even the physical order. According to her, both the number of Jack’s house in Belgrave Square and the fashionableness of one side or the other can be changed, if necessary.

The characters in the country harbour equally strange, inverted and subverted notions towards society, marriage, and life. Unlike any other young girl, Cecily declares, “I don’t like romantic novels that end happily. They depress me so much” (26). While in a normal world, pretending to be ‘good’ and actually ‘wicked’ is considered to be hypocrisy, in an inverted world order, as one finds in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily reverses it wholly, and turns it upside-down as she declares, “...pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time...would be hypocrisy” (29). She emphasizes that she knows how important it is ‘not’ to keep one’s business engagements, thereby hinting at the carnivalesque nature of the play where established rules are flouted and deliberately broken. Cecily’s account of Canon Chasuble is equally hilarious: “Dr. Chasuble is the most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows” (42). She, by her own admission, is never punctual herself but likes punctuality in others.

If Cecily is the country-maid with inverted, lopsided notions, Gwendolen is Cecily’s city counterpart. Gwendolen urges Jack to look lovingly at her “especially when other people are present” (14). Even though towards the end, the play shifts towards unraveling the mystery of Jack’s identity, Gwendolen is never far behind with her inverted one-liners. Throughout the play she entertains one with such comments as, “If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life” (66). In fact, Gwendolen and Cecily are almost parallel to each other. They both possess a keen sense of humour. They not only fall for the same name ‘Ernest’ and utter similar speeches but even react in similar ways when in distress. After lying repeatedly, one would expect Jack and Algernon to beg for forgiveness but they eat muffins in the garden. This attitude seems to Gwendolen and Cecily as ‘an act of repentance’ and that they still “have some sense of shame left” (55). If Cecily is moved by ‘the wonderful beauty’ of Algernon’s answer, Gwendolen solemnly declares, “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (56). Their similarity is further enhanced by the fact that when Gwendolen remarks, “I never change, except in my affections” (69), Cecily replies, “What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!” (69).

Miss Prism is another character who appears to be outwardly prim and proper but is actually pretentious, albeit in a comic manner. Throughout the play, she adopts a self-righteous attitude while being secretly attached to the rector Chasuble. Her infatuation with Chasuble is obvious. She suggests him to get married, as according to her, “by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation” (31). And thus to save Dr Chasuble from going astray, Miss Prism agrees to marry him at the end of the play.

One of the most important inversions in the play is the inversion of situations and the height of irresponsibility on part of the characters. Miss Prism was once in charge of a child whom she accidentally placed in a handbag and her own novel in the perambulator meant for the child in a ‘moment of mental abstraction’. If one is not already shocked by this revelation, she

further confesses that she ‘deposited’ the handbag containing the child ‘in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London’ (66). In spite of such shocking revelations, the other characters do not gasp in horror but process the information in a cool, composed, matter-of-fact manner as if it is a daily occurrence. Hence, it is not only the situations but even the reactions of the characters are reversed. Another example of such inversion is Jack and Algernon’s rushing off to change their names to Ernest since both Gwendolen and Cecily have fallen in love with that name and believe it that it is the only ‘safe name’. In fact, Jack is even offered by Canon Chasuble to be christened with new born babies. Jack’s denial of such a proposition points to the fact that he himself is aware of the comicality and distortion, yet decides to continue with it. Even Lady Bracknell, who herself is relentless in making distorted, paradoxical observations, is shocked by Jack’s and Algernon’s willingness to be baptized at such mature age and cries out: “At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! ...I will not hear of such excess” (64).

Moreover, this inversion of gender roles is perpetuated throughout the couples in the play, with the female characters being much more assertive than their male counterparts. Lord Bracknell’s absence from the stage and plot, establishes Lady Bracknell in the dominant position in their relationship. When Jack proposes Gwendolyn, she commands the entire scene. Similarly, Cecily is one step ahead of Algernon in her pre-emptive engagement. Both women also control their partners’ identities, as they declare, “Your Christian names are still an insurmountable barrier!” (56), forcing both Algernon and Jack to consider being re-christened Ernest. Gwendolyn and Cecily’s fascination with the name Ernest, even beyond their love for their prospective partners, is also an inversion of the well-developed romantic ideal of love conquering all. Great romantic heroines may find the name and family of their lovers immaterial, but Cecily and Gwendolyn stand by the notion that Ernest, and only Ernest, is a valid name for a husband. This determination is a sly inversion of its own, taunting the sentimentalism and melodrama of Victorian theater.

Another noteworthy ‘carnavalesque’ feature embedded in the play is the blurring or obliteration of identity for a short period of time. During carnival, people resort to masks and endeavour to forget their social identities. By doing so, they leave behind their social, moral responsibilities and engross themselves totally in the revelry and merry-making. In Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though the characters do not overtly resort to masks, they change their names and introduce themselves as totally different persons. Two of the important characters in the play, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing, maintain at least two identities for the two worlds—one driven by order, authority, control and, another by amusement, pleasure and entertainment. As during the festival, kings pretend to be beggars and beggars kings, in *Earnest*, Jack pretends to be his disreputable brother Ernest in town and Algernon, initially pretends to be his invalid friend Mr Bunbury and then later on the same fictional disreputable brother of Jack in the country. If Algernon gives this practice of shifting identities a name—Bunburying—Jack is its personification and boldly declares, “Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country...” (6). In fact, to some it would appear that Jack is almost defining carnivalesque— an instrument of ‘letting-off-steam’— while justifying his reason for maintaining two identities:

When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health

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or one's happiness, to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest....(Wilde 7)

By pretending to be Ernest, they are able to break the social boundaries they are confined to as Jack and Algernon.

An important aspect of the 'carnavalesque' is that of questioning the dominant authority. Established truths and ideas are similarly tested and contested. In *Earnest*, Wilde replaces not the figures of authority but the values. Here, one finds some of the mores and methods of Victorian society are continually being challenged and sometimes even mocked at. In fact, almost everything that society considers imperative has been subverted and ridiculed by Wilde. Algernon overtly criticizes the authoritarian tendency of setting "a hard and fast rule about what one should and one shouldn't read" (5), thereby criticizing the tendency of the ruling class to curb the freedom of the masses. The concept of marriage has also been targeted, trivialized and downplayed in the play quite a few times, through laughter, mimicry and mockery. The hypocrisy and infidelity randomly practiced in the contemporary society, is aptly pointed out by Algernon that "in married life three is company, two in none". One may also consider Algernon's lament about the low quality of wine in the homes of married men. Both comments highlight the lack of companionship resulting from marriage without compatibility and love, suggesting that the Victorian husband, and in some cases the wife, needs alcohol and a mistress to be happy. He very consciously declares: "Divorces are made in Heaven". Lady Bracknell talks about a Lady Harbury who is quite "altered after the death of her husband", that "she looks twenty years younger" and "her hair has turned quite gold from grief" (11). Lady Bracknell herself, on the other hand, is the monstrous pillar of institutionalized greed in marriage, albeit in a comic manner:

But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. 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. (Wilde 61)

Her obsession with money in marriage is obvious from her interrogation of Jack. She almost immediately changes her opinion about Cecily as a match for her nephew, Algernon, when she comes to know about her property in 'funds'. Her assessment of English education is equally covertly critical: "Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever" (16). The concept of illness and death are equally subverted in the play. Lady Bracknell treats death as something that can be controlled and moulded according to one's whims and wishes. This is evident from her suggestion to Algernon about his 'unreal' invalid friend Mr Bunbury:

Well, I must say Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd...I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday (Wilde 19)

Later on, when Algernon informs her that Mr Bunbury is dead, she seems to be quite satisfied with the news and states: "I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice" (58). Generally people are rendered sympathetic and charitable by the news of death. But not Miss Prism, or any other character in this play for that matter. She is least sympathetic to Jack's 'fictitious' brother Ernest

and when she learns of his death in Paris, she shockingly remarks, “What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it” (32). Later on when Algernon appears as Jack’s disreputable brother who was supposed to be dead, Miss Prism exclaims, “After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing” (35).

Jack makes a dig at the so-called intelligent and ‘clever’ by crying out in exasperation: “I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays...I wish to goodness we had a few fools left” (20). Miss Prism criticizes “the modern mania of turning bad people into good people at a moment’s notice” (26). Even the Church is not spared from being mocked at, and religiosity has been reduced to a farce. Both Jack and Algernon rush to Canon Chasuble to be baptized with the name ‘Ernest’ for reasons quite contrary to religion, for they do so not out of love of Christ in the spirit of earnestness but for profane love practiced with insincerity. Indeed they even squabble over who deserves to be baptized with that name. Canon Chasuble, a man no less than a member of the church, is obsessed with certain sermons and applies them, by his own admission, in all occasions—joyful as well as distressing—without discrimination. He not only agrees to christen Jack and Algernon anew but even assures Jack that in christening, ‘sprinkling’ is all that is necessary, thereby covertly belittling the contemporary church practices. The tendency of the upper class people to weigh everything in terms of money is also hinted and mocked at in Lane’s comment and Algernon’s quoting him “about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money” (10).

The lack of sense of propriety is also bashed under the sugar coating of comedy. References of ‘flirting’ in public, especially on part of women both maiden as well as married, have frequently been made. The characters not only satirize popular notions of the idle and hypocrite rich but also poke fun at Utilitarianism. When Jack admits to Lady Bracknell that he smokes, she replies that ‘a man should have an occupation’ (16). Later, Algernon admits that he doesn’t ‘mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind’ (22). Jack and Algernon have no real occupations or professions; their purposelessness therefore critiques the ‘earnest’ nature of Utilitarian activities. Miss Prism reminds Cecily that watering the plants is a utilitarian (and, therefore, to be despised) occupation which belongs properly to the gardener.

Wilde, thus deliberately and strategically turns upside-down all that the Victorian society held sacred and serious— money, aristocracy, property, religion, love, marriage, education, health, death, responsibility, social class, and respectability. It is by placing importance on the trivialities of life, juxtaposed with carelessness, that Wilde subverts the traditionally serious values.

Feasting is a very important aspect of the festival or carnival. Wine, food and laughter are its inseparable concomitants. In Wilde’s play, one gets the combination of all these three, thereby reflecting the festive atmosphere of the text. Eating and drinking, whether of champagne or tea, cucumber sandwiches and bread and butter, cake, tea cake, muffins, or crumpets, whether in Algernon’s flat or Jack’s country house, is a near-continuous activity that engages the attention and passions of the characters. References to wine are made at made at the very beginning. In this context, Wilde makes it clear that Lane is not completely defenseless and has established his rights to help himself to the champagne in the most defiant of fashion. Algernon’s obsession with food can be seen as a part of the festive inversion of the play, as he is most vocal in his trivialization of serious values. He hates those “who are not serious about meals” and finds it “shallow of them”, he himself being serious only about meals. In fact, he himself declares:

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When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. (Wilde 52)

Food has also been used as a weapon of warfare by Gwendolen and Cecily. Gwendolen prefers bread and butter to cake as cake is not eaten in the best houses any more. Moreover she likes her tea without sugar as sugar is no longer considered fashionable. Cecily provides her with both cake and sugar. This leads to verbal duel between them which reminds one of Algernon's earlier prediction that Gwendolen and Cecily will call each other sister after "they have called each other a lot of things first" (21). There are also other minor references to cucumber sandwiches, crumpets, teacakes etc. Hence, it may be said that Wilde deliberately trivializes the other far more important aspects of life and gives importance to an aspect like food which some would consider trivial.

If in the 'carnavalesque', suppressed voices emerge and uninhibited spirit is released, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* even minor characters like Miss. Prism, Lane, Canon Chasuble etc. speak their mind and even criticize dominant authority through mockery and mimicry whenever possible. In fact, this play can also be categorized as a 'dialogic' text where numerous characters participate and each have their distinctive voices and views. No single voice attempts to dominate or choke other voices and even marginal characters are given freedom to express their views. Lane doesn't hesitate in enjoying the champagne in Algernon's house and gives the reason that the wine in a bachelor's house is of superior quality than that in a married man's house. Even though he doesn't have many utterances, his wit and sense of humour doesn't go unnoticed:

ALGERNON. Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

LANE. I do my best to give satisfaction, sir. (Wilde 24)

During 'carnival' people indulge in a heightened state of merry-making, revelry, profanity and irresponsibility without the fear of punishment. Similarly, the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are in no need of forgiveness for sinful secrets. Jack and Algernon are easily forgiven for their hypocrisy and deceit. Even Miss Prism is ultimately forgiven for her utterly irresponsible act of placing an infant in a handbag and then leaving the bag in a railway station. Instead of being shocked or enraged, the characters display a calm and easy demeanor at this confession. Forgiving and forgetting, thus, seems to be the motto, in keeping with the spirit of carnivalesque where the Bourgeois morality and authority don't exist.

Other than inversions, almost all the characters in the play nestle strange, frivolous, trivial notions which they express under the garb of utter seriousness. Algernon frames 'rules' for such a hypocritical practice as 'Bunbrying' and even calls it serious. Jack writes 'frantic letters' to the Scotland Yard when he loses a cigarette case. Gwendolen and Cecily are more infatuated with the name 'Ernest' than the actual person. The most amazing fact is that Gwendolen declares that the hypocritically assumed name suits Jack perfectly, that it is a 'divine name', that it has 'music of its own', 'that it produces vibrations'. Cecily, too, harbours 'a girlish dream' of loving someone whose name was Ernest, and declares that 'there is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence' (41). These prompt Jack and Algernon to rush off to arrange their christenings and change their names to 'Ernest'.

If the mingling of fact and fantasy is one of the features of 'carnavalesque', one finds ample evidence of this in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both Gwendolen and Cecily fall in

love with the name 'Ernest', rather than the actual person. But Cecily goes a step further by creating an utterly fantastical situation where she arranges her own engagement with the name, buys a ring in that name and promised to always wear it. She, on her own, writes letters to herself in the name of Ernest, breaks off the engagement but forgives it before the week was out. And she even declares this with a hint of pride as it appropriately explains her utter, if not excessive, fascination with the name 'Ernest'.

Parallelism seems to be yet another feature of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and through these parallelisms, the distinctions between the high and the low, the central and the marginal, the serious and the comic, are dissolved. Gwendolen and Cecily are almost parallel to one another and they mirror each other's speeches, actions and reactions. Lady Bracknell may be compared with Miss Prism as both are apparently prim, proper and serious but their real natures are revealed through their observations and confessions. If Lady Bracknell is grossly materialistic, Miss Prism is utterly irresponsible. Their parallelism might also hint at another aspect of the carnivalesque, that of mingling the high and the low. Lane and Canon Chasuble may be paired with each other in that they both are marginal characters but they never fail to entertain one with their equally comical remarks.

Thus, the expectations aroused by the seemingly innocuous and apparently moral title of the play—*The Importance of Being Earnest*—give way to a stark reversal in the play proper. The subtitle appears to be more relevant, for it is its very non-seriousness and its trivialization of earnestness, which makes it "a trivial comedy for serious people". The play seems to be a light-hearted entertainment for people engaged in serious pursuits. Yet as one reads the play, one cannot but suspect that the title and subtitle mean more than that which meets the eye, that it is the celebrated Wildean tongue-in-cheek approach at work, and that it is a serious comedy for those trivial people who perpetually exhibit their earnestness. The inversion is, thus, embedded in the title and the subtitle as well.

The 'carnavalesque' reading of the play is not without purpose. It can be seen as an instrument by which Wilde gets back at the Victorian society without appearing to be too caustic or acerbic. In fact, he makes fun of everything the English held, and still hold, sacred—money, birth, religion, food, property, social class, philanthropy, education, and aristocracy—yet in so nonsensical, light-hearted and fantastic a way that the comedy never fails to amuse. *The Importance of Being Earnest* ranks high, not only on account of its gaiety but because it satirizes vividly and pointedly, yet not unkindly, the mannerisms and foibles of contemporary society. The play foregrounds a perpetual 'carnavalesque' world where reason and external authority are denied entry. It was, perhaps, Wilde's prescription for accepting the bitter experiences with a sense of humour, wit and gaiety, to laugh confidently at the beauty and the grotesqueness of life. He was probably espousing his belief that the common intrigues of daily life are not really the moralist's province at all, but interesting only for the sheer amusement that can be got out of them. Wilde was also the veritable spokesman for 'aestheticism' which espouses a belief in the supreme importance of 'Art for Art's sake', without regard for its practical, ethical or social purpose. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the characters reflect the aesthetic, dandified attitudes of Wilde himself, albeit in an exaggerated manner.

Artifice, not nature, rules the play's drawing room milieu. Jack exhibits the dandy's preference for London. The young women in the play also express their preference for the artificial and beautiful over the natural and genuine. For Wilde—in life as in art—dandyism was

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the last heroic gesture against the increasingly vulgar world of the late nineteenth century; the dandy's superiority and individualism were his only codes for criticizing the contemporary manners and morality. Even in his personal life, Wilde flouted the contemporary social norms and was far from being discreet about his activities. Although his literary success made him acceptable in society, he was, nevertheless, criticized by his friends, acquaintances and the general public for his 'loose morals' which ultimately led to his incarceration. Unlike in his real life, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, almost all the characters are guilty of lying, hypocrisy, greed, irresponsibility and sinful secrets, yet are free from punishment. They are not only exempted from being criticized but are even easily accepted and forgiven.

Thus, *The Importance of Being Earnest* might also be seen as a kind of Wilde's wish fulfillment, his utopic vision where every individual can live his life freely with mirth and pleasure, associated with the 'carnavalesque,' without the fear of being criticized and punished. It can finally be said that if Ben Jonson gave to the English stage "the comedy of humours", and Congreve the true "comedy of manners", Wilde, in his one masterpiece, brought in the same company of excellence 'the comedy of pure fun'. In the play, with insincerity almost as the theme, there is more sincerity than in anything else he did.

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